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TOLTEC TOM THE MAD PROSPECTOR

OR,

Unearthing the Cavern League.

A Romance of the Loco Island Mystery.

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"TEXAS TOM-CAT" NOVELS,
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
LOCO ISLAND.

A HORSEMAN, mounted on a jaded beast, drew rein on a slight eminence, and adjusted a field-glass to his eyes. Behind him lay the desert hills and sand wastes of Southwestern Arizona;

"I GUESS ITS GRIM DEATH AND HIS DAUGHTER?" DILLON SUGGESTED.

before, the wide-spreading mesa and the narrow valley of the Colorado. There was little in the landscape that was pleasing. The hills had a dead, burnt-out, chalky appearance, the result of intense heat and lack of moisture; and over all the plain and rolling country there was scarce a green thing to gladden the eye. Yet there were brilliant patches in the river valley; and at one point, where a large island lifted itself above the water's edge like a great, stranded turtle, the color deepened and thickened until the island glowed with a purple fire.

More than once the horseman lifted the glass to his eyes. Then he replaced it in the case that was swung by a leather strap from his shoulders.

"Get up!" he commanded, pricking the tired horse with the big rowels of his spurs. "If I'm not mistaken there's a bit of smoke down there on the island. If so, we may find some sort of hospitality and perhaps a bite of sweet grass for your empty stomach. At any rate, there's water in the river, and you need water about as much as you do grass."

The horse was as eager to advance as was its rider, for the scent of the singing water was tantalizing to its parched throat. The dust lay deep along the trailless slopes, wherever there was enough earth to be powdered into dust, and an impalpable cloud quickly enveloped them. When they emerged from it they were among the rugged and precipitous bluffs that here flanked the river.

Crazed with thirst, the beast hurried toward the water, but the banks were too steep and the rocks too shaly, so the man spurred it on along the perilous brink, looking for a safe place to descend. The island was near, now, and in plain view, but no sign of drifting smoke could be seen on any portion of it; a thing enigmatical and perplexing to the rider, as evinced by his frowning glance of disappointment.

"Ho!" he exclaimed, pulling sharply and half-angrily at the bridle-rein, for the horse showed a disposition to rush toward the stream regardless of the forbidding character of the banks.

The wrench caused the animal to slip on the rotten ledge, and in another moment both were in the river. The water was deep at that point, and marvelously swift—so deep and swift that the green current curled far above their heads and seemed bent on drowning them before they could make a struggle.

When they arose, the man was clinging desperately to the horse's mane. The animal was wild with the sudden terror occasioned by the fall and plunge. But the rider, recovering as quickly as he could from his involuntary bath and supporting himself partially in the waves with his free hand, uttered coaxing and quieting words, and succeeded in stilling its fears. Then he guided it in the only direction open to them, and it was soon swimming with strong, steady strokes toward the island.

A large portion of the island was of a sandy character, but here the rocks rose from the water in gentle terraces that were yet granite barriers against the beating flood. Upon one of these terraces the horse scrambled, while the man drew himself up beside it.

"Quite enough water for once, eh?" he asked, stroking the animal's wet neck. "Enough of anything is enough, and more is a rank nuisance. I feel as if I'd played camel and swallowed sufficient to last me a week."

The horse, however, did not feel that way, for its skin was scarcely dry before it was back at the water's edge drinking as if famished. Then, having satisfied its thirst, it began to nibble at some unpalatable and innutritious desert grass that had found a foothold in a crevice of the rocks.

As for the horseman he wrung the water from his wet clothing as best he could. The bath had not been a cold one, for the stream had had a long run through blazing sunshine from the icy mountains that gave it birth, and the man knew that the heat and the drying atmosphere would quickly make him comfortable. The plunge had not injured his water-proof cartridges. Having satisfied himself of this he drew the horse away from the coarse, unwholesome grass, and, mounting, rode toward the center of the island, watching keenly for a suggestion of the smoke he thought he had seen.

But, the island was deserted, and there were no indications that the foot of man had ever trodden it. There was nowhere a sign of life; and the only thing that grew there, which an animal could eat, with the exception of the useless desert grass, was the poisonous and crazing plant known as *loco*. It abounded everywhere, and its bright blossoms had given the island

that glowing, purple hue which the horseman had observed from the distance.

"Nothing but loco, loco!" he averred, a frown settling again on his handsome face. "That's the reason, I suppose, this part of the country has never been taken up by stockmen. The hills are full of it, wherever anything grows at all; and this island hasn't anything else."

He was right in his guess about the stockmen—partly right at least. They had attempted, some years before, to establish ranches on this section of the Colorado, below its confluence with the Gila, and had quitted the field in disgust because of the great abundance of *loco*. On the plains and in the mountains it is almost everywhere a menace to the well-being of the herds; for once an animal contracts a liking for the deadly thing that animal's usefulness is ended. A locoed beast is worthless. It refuses to eat that which had once been grateful to its palate and wanders the country over in search of the baneful plant. A sort of insanity ensues, accompanied by emaciation; and if the habit is persisted in it leads to death. There are many ranches on the Colorado, but at this particular point, at the time of our story, there were none.

The horse put down its head and tried to snatch a mouthful of the deadly herb as it walked, pulling at the bit which restrained it, but the firm hand of the rider held it in check.

Along one side of the island, and coming well down toward the water's edge, was a growth of chaparral and mesquite, and toward this the horseman directed his way. When he had gained it, he tied the animal to one of the mesquite bushes, muzzled it with his handkerchief so it could not get at the abounding *loco*, and then took a turn about the place.

He was puzzled by the disappearance of what he had deemed a column of ascending smoke. It had been light, and was only revealed by the powerful glass he carried. If it had really been a smoke column, then there must be somewhere evidences of the recent existence of the fire that caused it; but, though he walked the island over and looked carefully everywhere, he could discover nothing.

"My eyes deceived me!" was his muttered comment. "It was a puff of dust whirled upward by a gust of wind, or a spiral of vapory spray. It couldn't have been smoke."

Satisfied of this he remounted his horse and sought a spot where he might leave the island in safety. Having found it, he rode the animal boldly into the stream, guiding it toward the shore side opposite to that from which he came. The copious draughts of water it had taken had strengthened it greatly, and it now breasted the current, which was not so fierce as that into which it had fallen, with very little indication of fatigue or weakness, and soon stood in safety on the further rocky bank.

In a manner that was somewhat aimless, and which seemed to prove that his mind was in an undecided state, the horseman entered the hills, which rose frowning and abrupt.

But, after a time, he came to a faintly-defined path or trail, such as might have been made by some wild animal in ascending and descending the slopes. The sight of it brought a change of demeanor, and he rode on with the steadiness of one who has found the route he has been seeking.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOME OF THE LEAGUE.

ALTHOUGH the movements of the young rider had been apparently unobserved, such was not really the case. Keen eyes had been upon him at every turn, eyes filled with a jealous and murderous suspicion. From the time he appeared in sight on the eastern ridge until he vanished into the opposite hills these cruel eyes never once lost sight of him.

Beneath the island over which he had so carefully ridden, and within less than a stone's throw of the point on which he landed, a number of men were concealed. The place they occupied was a large, and at the time, dark cavern. Its spacious area covered quite a third of the visible portion of the island, for it was beneath the water fully as much as above it. There seemed but one entrance, which was a dark tunnel stretching away into the unseen depths. Near the river's brink and beneath the water-line was another opening, if opening it can be called. It could not seemingly be used as a means of either egress or ingress, however, for a fierce and strong eddy of the stream dashed furiously against its granite sides, throwing a constant spray into the subterranean chamber. But it served, in conjunction with the black tunnel, to give ventilation and a marked degree of coolness to the gloomy depths.

The point from which the glittering ed was a cleft in the rocky wall of the narrow cleft, fringed about and hidden by growth of coarse grass and stunted greasewood. There was more than one pair of eyes, although the owners of but two seemed greatly interested or excited. One of these owners was a swarthy man, of herculean build, and evil, furrowed face. The other a lithe, dark-faced demon, who seemed either a Chinese or an East Indian.

"Do you suppose 'twas an accident entirely, Paou, that threw the scamp into the stream?" the first queried, the lines in his wrinkled face twisting with the fury of his suspicious hatred. "It don't seem that he'd tumble in that way on purpose, but it'd be a mighty cute scheme to avoid suspicion!"

"Ah! who can say?" and the reply of the dark-visaged man was couched in words in which there was scarcely a trace of the accent of his nativity.

The stranger was on the island, now, and near the point from which the eyes were peering. The man who had first spoken stepped back into the darkness of the cavern, returning soon with a repeating rifle. After him crowded several men who were undoubtedly Chinese, as their faces and dress proclaimed.

There was cause for excitement in the manner of these men, which was shown, however, in a very quiet and suppressed way. They were fearful lest the new-comer should prove a spy of the Government, in which case, if their hiding-place were revealed to his inquisitive gaze, they should very likely have to contemplate a disagreeable return to their native China. For the cavern beneath the island was the headquarters of a band of men engaged in the nefarious business of smuggling Chinese coolies across the boundary-line between the United States and Mexico, in defiance of the law excluding the Chinese from this country.

There were more yellow-faced coolies in the shadows further back, but the majority of these were lost to all things mundane, being buried deep in the rose-colored and lethargic dreams produced by the opium-pipe, and happily oblivious to any dangers that might be threatening.

"Shall I take a shot at him?" asked the captain, who was known as Basil Flint. "It may save us a deal of trouble hereafter. As he stands now, I can bowl him over nicely."

The Chinese leader shrugged his shoulders. "Fate is fate. If he is to die that way, shoot. But may not the smoke be seen?"

Flint lowered the half-raised rifle. "Where is Valentine? Perhaps the fellow has seen our smoke! If he has, I'll put this ball through Valentine's body. Send Val this way, will you?"

He did not raise his voice to a pitch that would send its tones through the opening. Captain Basil was too shrewd and wary to do a thing so foolish as that, no matter how angry or irritated he might be.

The man, Valentine, shuffled forward in answer to the call—a hang-dog, unkempt villain, for whom hemp was certainly growing.

"Have you been careful about the firewood, Valentine?" Flint asked, a suppressed tremor of rage in his words.

"Yes, sir," the man answered quickly, giving a sort of military salute as he jerked out the words. "It's been o' the driest. A cord of it couldn't make a hatful of smoke!"

The man was lying, but he did it in such a brazen way, and with such an air of injured innocence, that the suspicions of the captain were stayed. Valentine had been among the first to observe the strange horseman. He had not been as careful as usual in his selection of wood that morning; and thinking the smoke might have been seen, he hastened to rake the embers apart and subdue the fire. And now, that there was no possibility his laziness and carelessness could be discovered, he uttered his falsehoods unblushingly.

"You're sure of it?" with a searching glance. "Very well; but if I knew you had, you'd pay for it dearly, my man."

"You can look for yourself," said Valentine, doggedly. "There ain't any fire to speak on, an' what there is wouldn't let out enough smoke to be smelt, let alone to be seen."

But the captain was again watching the movements of the horseman, having turned from his inferior as soon as the threat was uttered.

"See! He's searching the island, Paou! What in the name of all the fiends can that mean, if he hasn't seen or heard something to make him suspicious? Answer me that, will you?"

It was strange that he should thus address the Chinese as an equal; though not strange, when it is known that the latter was his trusted and

lieutenant, and as useful a man as there was in all the band. In fact, Captain Basil would not have known how to carry on his extremely risky and perilous business without the aid of the clever and astute oriental. Paou was so capable a fellow in many ways that he must have ranked high, whatever the nature of his calling.

"Now he's beating the chaparral!" the excited and anxious Flint called out, ignoring the fact that all could observe the actions of the mysterious stranger quite as well as could the captain himself. "There's surely something back of all this! Take a look over the hills, you fellows, and peel your eyes sharp, now. If he has comrades anywhere, perhaps you can get a sight of them. My! I'm half tempted to take a shot at the rascal, anyhow."

Twice he lifted the rifle, only to lower it with a muttered curse. He feared to fire. He could have slain the stranger with the greatest ease; but the thought that there might be, somewhere in the near hills, eyes to see and ears to hear, caused him to stay his hand. If there were any such eyes and ears, the killing of this man at that time would be the greatest folly. The secret which he had been able to keep from the officers of the law and all their myrmidons for these many months would be revealed, and the cavern hidden away beneath the island could protect and shelter him no more.

The slant-eyed Chinese "peeled" their orbs of vision and looked, but nothing could they discern save the gray and brown rocks, the patches of mesquite and greasewood, and the occasional lines of pinones which marked some draw or arroya.

Still they could not say that no men were concealed among those same hills. No one could say that. The eagle soaring far above could not have told, for there were many places that defied the penetration of even the keenest eye.

And thus uncertain, the captain staid the deadly rifle, though his fingers twitched and he longed with an infinite longing to send a ball at the man who had thus dared set foot on the soil sacred to villainy.

Again the stranger approached them, peering this way and that, in a manner that to Flint seemed remarkable and altogether unaccountable. When he drew out the handkerchief for the purpose of muzzling the horse the captain was for a moment firm in the belief that a signal was intended. And he was not wholly convinced of his error even when the handkerchief had been knotted into a muzzle.

"You see, Paou, he may have fixed on that as a signal! If he did, it only goes to prove how shrewd a scamp he really is, and how dangerous. I don't like the looks of the thing a bit."

"Shoot, then!" said the cat-like Paou, showing his white teeth.

"Which you know I daren't, you rascal! The fates, as you call 'em, are against me. It almost makes a fellow think there may be something in that fool belief of yours, after all. Now, there ain't a thing to keep me from plugging that fellow, so far as any of us can discover, and yet I don't. Why don't I? Because I can't! That is, I'm afraid to, which amounts to the same thing. And yet, there may not be another man within miles of here. It does look like all these little things were decided by fate, or something other than chance; though I've always held to the last notion. If I believe in a God! But I don't; and I'll not talk such nonsense. I don't shoot the fellow because my better judgment tells me it may not be a safe and wise thing to do. That's all there is of it. And if you can bolster your fool fatalism with that, why you're welcome to!"

The man had retraced his way and regained his horse by this time, and was on the point of remounting. Such of the Celestials as had roused themselves sufficiently from their opium dreams to take an interest in what was transpiring, now crept back to their hard beds in various portions of the cave. But Flint and Paou remained at the aperture, watching with anxious glances every movement of the unknown. And there they stayed until horse and rider again dared the current, and disappeared in the ragged hills.

CHAPTER III.

THE TOLTEC LEGEND.

BEING apparently reassured by the discovery of the dim trail leading toward the higher ranges, the horseman continued his way at a more rapid gait. Occasionally, when the trail was more than usually rough and boulder-strewn, he got down and walked beside the animal until smoother and firmer ground was reached.

Suddenly, on rounding a bend, he found himself face to face with a keen-eyed man in the rough dress of a prospector. This individual had evidently been waiting for him; for he had taken a firm stand in the center of the trail, and as the horseman came in sight he brought to his shoulder a Winchester rifle of heavy caliber.

"Stop jist where you be!" he commanded, in sharp, quick accents. "I 'low you don't know that this is the 'special trompin'-groun' of yours truly! Well, 'tis; an' they hain't nobody else any rights to go rovin' over it."

A smile came to the rider's face. "I'll leave it, my good friend, if you'll only show me the way out."

"Then you ain't lookin' fer no treasure, ner nothin'?" without lowering the threatening rifle. "Honest Injun, now?"

"Cross my heart if I am!" was the smiling reply.

The gun came down. "That's somethin' like. Though you do beat all, if it's so. I mus' say you're the fust I've struck that ain't been hunting fer somethin' o' the kind. My name's Toltec! Maby you've heern o' me, Toltec Tom!"

The smile expanded. "There are not many who haven't, where I hail from. Everybody has heard of Toltec. And, now, if you'll allow me, I'll go on up the trail. You live hereaway, eh?"

"Jist beyont the divide," answered Toltec, pleased with the other's manner. "And, meanin' no offense, what might be your handle, ef I may ask?"

"Philip Dillon; and I'm from Fort Mesquite. I've been on a sort of hunt out here, and got turned 'round someway and lost. When I s'ruck this trail a bit ago I felt better, knowing it must lead somewhere, even if it was to a bear's den."

The prospector's eyes flashed. "Not meanin' anything by that, now, I calculate?"

At this Dillon broke into a hearty laugh. "You'll have to pardon me, Toltec. I didn't think how that sounded till the words were out of my mouth. Of course I couldn't think of calling your home a bear's den. It was the uncertain character of the trail I referred to. You'll say yourself that one can hardly tell what made it."

"That's so!" and the frown vanished. "Come on up to my house, and I'll make you to home. That is, my darter will; fer a rough ole cuss like me ain't no great shakes at entertainin'. You look 'sif a little rest an' somethin' to eat wouldn't go amiss, now. An' that boss is plum tuckered."

Dillon was glad to accept the offer, and as he rode along at Toltec's side he wondered what sort of creature the daughter of this prospector might be. He had heard of Toltec frequently, for the man was well known at the military post from which Dillon came. But he had never heard of the daughter, and until this, had no knowledge of her existence.

The officers of Fort Mesquite, which was on the Mexican boundary, fifteen miles or more away as the crow flies, had spoken of the prospector many times since young Dillon had been assigned to duty there. By them he was considered a harmless sort of fellow, a monomaniac on the subject of treasure-hunting, and by them called the "mad treasure-seeker." Toltec had been at the little post town on several occasions, and was always pointed out to the curious as something of an oddity. Dillon had seen him once, and thus had recognized him when he stood so sternly in the trail with that uplifted and menacing rifle.

"Do you say there is grass up there?" the young man questioned.

"A hull valley full of it. I picked out the place for my house fer that reason. I hain't got a cow ner boss ner anything to eat the truck, but it looks purty, and my gal likes to see it; so there I put down my stakes."

The abundance and richness of the grass in this sequestered spot in the sun-baked mountains was apparent as soon as they crossed the high ridge which Toltec had spoken of as the "divide." Below them the valley lay like a bright, green emerald, made verdant and sweet by the waters that leaped to it from some springs along the hillsides.

Toltec's home stood in a sheltered nook in the midst of this little Eden. To the surprise of the horseman he found it a commodious house, built of logs and adobe. It was truly no bear's den; no cave in the hills!

The prospector, who had been glancing sideways at his guest, noted the surprised look with a secret pleasure. He had made the home sub-

stantial and had beautified it because of the love he bore his daughter, and the stranger's appreciation was very gratifying.

But the young man's surprise was heightened when, at his host's bidding, he crossed the threshold and found himself in the presence of a mature and charming woman, whom Toltec proudly presented as his daughter, Margaret.

"This is indeed a pleasure!" Dillon declared, sinking into the rude chair offered him.

"You expected to find a squaw, I presume?" and Margaret's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"No—that is—I hardly expected—I mean I had no expectations in the matter!" Dillon stammered, growing very red and nervous. "But you were not reared amid—amid such surroundings?"

"Oh, these hills? They are very beautiful, I think. But I was not reared here. We have been here only a few months. Father has got the idea into his head that there is a vast treasure somewhere in this region, and that it's worth searching for. That's why we're here."

Dillon felt confused, and not knowing what to say further, found it convenient to excuse himself for the purpose of lariatting out his horse. He wanted time to get away and think. What did all this mean? was the query that perplexed him. Here was a woman, obviously educated and refined, and unquestionably beautiful. And she was living in these desolate hills, and Toltec Tom was her father—Toltec, the crazed seeker after mythical wealth! It was too much for him. Cool thought was necessary, and cool thought could not come to him in that house and in the presence of that woman.

Toltec, on introducing his daughter, had stated that his real name was Thomas Grant and his daughter's name Margaret Grant. But this explained nothing.

"My head spins round like a top!" the youth declared, as he found himself alone with his horse. "I never struck anything like that in the whole course of my experience. Why does she let Toltec shut her up here in this God-forsaken place! The grass is pretty and the hills are refreshing, but one can find water and grass where there are people to talk to and look at. What does she do to show off her dresses to other women? She must nearly die! for she has dresses! That was a pretty one she had on. And she looked as sweet as a peach in it. I wonder now if she keeps dressed up all the while? She couldn't have known that her old badger of a father was to bring any one home with him."

Dillon's thoughts were running riot. He could make neither head nor tail of the mystery thus suddenly presented. He felt that surely there must be a mystery. Yet, he asked himself, what was there so strange in the fact that a young woman had chosen to follow and remain with her father wherever he might select to go? It was dutifulness in a high degree, that was all. And then, his mind traveling the circle of all possible guesses, he returned to the thought which had come to him at first: The girl's beauty was what made the matter seem to him mysterious. If she had been as homely as the half-breed peons and others whom he was accustomed to see occupying adobes and rough houses and living lonely lives, there would have been no mystery at all.

With a mind cleared of its fogs, but with no key to the riddle, he returned to the house, after having consumed an outrageously long time in attending to the needs of his horse.

On again entering he was surprised to discover new occupants. A peon-looking serving woman, introduced as Ina, and said to be of pure Toltec origin; and a dog, a large, shaggy, kind-eyed creature, called Gringo. Gringo had been in the hills, chasing jack rabbits probably; and Ina had been attending to some domestic duties in one of the other apartments of the house.

The addition of these to the membership of the household was a blessing to Dillon. He could employ himself in patting and stroking and talking to the dog, and in addressing his remarks to Ina. Any diversion was a relief, for the presence of Margaret was provocative of embarrassment.

Dinner was soon announced, it having been prepared early out of consideration for the half-famished condition of the guest.

After dinner, Toltec produced and lighted his pipe; then going to a little tin chest he extracted a paper which he evidently treasured highly.

"Bein' as you're not lookin' fer a lost gold mine er anything of the kind, I don't mind showin' this to you!" he declared, seating himself at the young man's side.

Dillon took the extended paper and glanced

curiously over it. But he could make nothing of it. It resembled the specimens of Indian picture writing he had seen at various times, some on bark and some engraved solidly in the stony cliffs of the Colorado Valley. There were lines which might have represented almost anything from mountain ranges to rivers, and there were rude drawings of men and of animals. In addition there was something which resembled a road or a line of embankments, and at the end a circular drawing, curiously made and specked, that looked like nothing he had ever beheld.

"Can't git the hang o' it?" Toltec smilingly questioned, as Dillon handed back the paper. "I 'low I couldn't have, neither, if I hadn't had help. It's Toltec writin', that is; an' queer stuff, too. The hen-tracks of a Philadelphia lawyer ain't nowhere alongside of it."

"You see, it's this way: A year er two ago I was down toward the pueblo that lays near the fur range o' hills, acrost the line in Sonora. I got thrown from my hoss while pokin' round that section, and purty bad hurt. The pueblo chaps took me in and made me comfortable, an' I stayed wi' 'em till I got well. The ones at that pueblo claims to be descendants of the ole Toltecs, an' they have many cur'us customs an' beliefs, though they've seen so many whites and rubbed ag'in' so many new fangled notions that a good many of 'em have about lost all faith in the'r ole religion."

"As it happened I got on tol'able good terms wi' one o' the head men. Ina, there, is his niece. One day, while we were talkin'—fer I staid there long enough to get a kind o' hang o' their lingo—he showed me a bit of Toltec writin'. 'Twas on antelope-skin, an' so ole that the skin was 'most droppin' to pieces. And he told me what it all meant; or at least what they believed it meant. And I took a copy of it; and this hyer bizness is the copy."

Dillon had been giving the prospector close attention, and now looked again at the mystical writing, which Toltec had spread out on a table before them.

"You see them lines," the old prospector continued, tapping the sheet with his forefinger. "They look as if they might be a road. An' hyer's people and animals comin' an' goin'. An' the road leads to this round, puzzle of a place. Well, 'cordin' to the idee o' the Toltecs—an' the idee has been handed down, they told me, from their great-great-grandfathers—them lines stand fer a tunnel, an' the roun', queer-lookin' place fer a cave. An' these men an' animals air comin' an' goin' jist fer to show that the tunnel can be navigated, as ye might say; an' that it's the openin' to the cave."

"The cave is said to 'a' been the place where their ole priests kept the treasures o' the tribe, an' is jist jam full o' gold an' silver an' diamonds an' sich truck. Seems like the priests were killed sudden. They was the only chaps that knowed jist where this cave was. A tribe o' red-skins come down from the North—an' that part sounds reasonable, fer it's jist like the 'Paches to do a thing o' that kind—an' killed the priests an' most o' the people."

"The rest left the country as quick as they could, an' moved funder south, to the p'int where they air now. An' the place where they come from, 'cordin' to their idee, ain't twenty miles from where we're settin' this minute!"

The old man's eyes were flashing and his breath was coming quick and hard as he concluded and faced toward his listener.

"An' that's what I'm huntin' fer! It's hyer; an' I'll find it jist as shore as you're a livin' man! I've already foun' the place where the ole pueblo stood, an' I'll find the cave!"

So earnest and contagious was his manner that Dillon himself grew excited over the thought of this great treasure, lying so near. But, his interest vanished when he remembered what he had been told at the fort concerning Toltec. And as he looked into the flushed face of the speaker he thought the people of the post must surely be right. Toltec was a monomaniac, made so doubtless by his long-continued and unsuccessful quest. The belief in this long-buried treasure was absurd, ridiculous! And yet, there was an earnestness in the words and bearing of the prospector, that elung to him and haunted him for many a long day.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEADLY BOWSTRING.

THE young horseman was no sooner in the hills than the leader of the League, Captain Basil Flint, instructed his lieutenant, Paou, as follows: "Don't lose him, Paou! Keep close at his

heels—as close as you can without danger of discovery. Watch every movement he makes; and if you think he's sure one of these Government spies, see that he never gets back to make a report to his superiors. And mark you! There may be more of the same kind loafing about. Don't let any of them catch you napping."

The command had scarcely been given before Paou was prepared to obey. He cast aside the ordinary citizen's dress, which he usually wore, and arrayed himself in a single, loose, flowing garment, which gave the greatest freedom of limb. On his feet he slipped the soft, white-soled shoes of the Chinese, and within a fold of his robe he concealed a knotted and queer-looking bit of cord.

By training and adoption Paou was a murderer. His instincts were of the cunning, treacherous order. Lying in ambush and safe, he was a brave and courageous fighter. Flitting on the trail of a foe he was alert, silent, and as elusive as a shadow. Striking from the rear and in the darkness he could only be likened to the sudden thunderbolt that prostrates without warning. Such an enemy is the most terrible, the most to be dreaded of all enemies.

As soon as he was reasonably sure he could not be seen by the man he intended to pursue, and possibly slay, he vanished from the cavern and disappeared in the gloom of the forbidding tunnel. Ten minutes later he appeared, crawling over the sand of the river-bank a quarter of a mile below. Without a moment's hesitation, he plunged into the water and swam to the opposite bank, up which he scrambled with the nimbleness of a crouching tiger; and so crouching, he slipped into the greasewood thickets and was lost to the view of the watchers in the cavern.

This bloodhound of the Orient was in reality a Chinese by birth. But his earlier years, up to the age of fifteen or sixteen, had been passed in Burmah and Hindostan, where he had been cast by one of the accidents which he chose to denominate fate. His father had been a professional conjurer and juggler. At his father's death, which occurred from a fall and in Hindostan, Paou fell into the hands of a snake-charmer, who belonged to the sect of secret stranglers known as the Thugs. Instead of killing his charge, as he was probably tempted to do, he brought the young Chinese up as his own son.

Being a wanderer thus by training and birth, Paou early came to America, and naturally fell in with the most vicious of his countrymen; and so we find him now the second in rank in command of as desperate a set of scoundrels as ever disgraced the American frontier, and by his superior valued as the most useful man in the band.

When Dillon was stopped by Toltec Tom's rifle, Paou was not a hundred paces in his rear, and when he continued on with the prospector to the latter's abode, the thug followed as closely as a regard for his own safety would warrant.

All day the Chinese lay crouched on the hillside with the house in plain view, watching and waiting with a patience worthy a better cause; and when darkness fell he approached the building and sprawled himself among the very shadows at the door. Yet so stealthy were all his movements that Gringo even was not aware of his proximity.

It was a pleasant day that young Dillon spent in the home of the old prospector—one of the pleasantest, he told himself, of his life. The charm of it lay in the presence of Margaret, whom he found more winning and womanly the longer he contemplated her varied attractions. And he found himself more than once wishing he might always bask in smiles that were as sweet and look into eyes that were as bright as were those of the prospector's daughter.

Hence, when Toltec gave him a cordial invitation to remain for a longer period than a single day he found no difficulty in convincing himself that this was the most proper and agreeable thing he could do.

When supper had been eaten and the old man had seated himself for his customary smoke, Dillon got up and left the house for a quiet stroll, alleging that he wished to see how his horse was faring, but in reality from a desire to be alone awhile with his own thoughts.

Scarcely for a moment throughout the entire day had Margaret been out of his mind. Whether caressing and teasing Gringo, talking with the treasure-seeker, or conversing with Ina on the customs and legends of her people, the voice and the face of Margaret had constantly obtruded to drive away all other memories and impressions. And so he desired to withdraw from this otherwise pleasant company that he might have nothing come between him and the

roseate visions and fancies that were upon him.

As he left the house and dropped the trail leading toward the lower slopes, Paou arose from his recumbent attitude and crept softly after.

Entirely forgetting his horse, Dillon continued on and on, every step taking him further and further from those who could aid him when the threatened blow should fall; and, as silently as the summer wind that wandered over the grasses, the thug kept close at his heels.

For an instant Dillon halted, so absorbed in his thick-coming fancies that he did not know he had stopped; and in that instant, quick as the lightning's flash, the thug sprung upon him. So sudden, so overwhelming and unexpected was the shock that the young man fell forward as if stricken by a rifle-ball. And as he did so, the long, serpentine fingers of the Chinese shot out and downward in a hawk-like swoop, and around the neck of the fallen man was the coil of the deadly bowstring, that fearful instrument of death so popular with the executioners of oriental lands.

There was no time, no opportunity to struggle. The coil tightened with the choking grasp of a python. The youth's breath was stopped, and before his starting eyes there swam a blood-red cloud which faded speedily into darkness and insensibility.

A low, gurgling laugh issued from the twitching lips of the thug—a laugh of hate and fiendish triumph. But its echoes did not float beyond the fringe of the nearest bushes. Paou was too careful an assassin for that. He never for a moment forgot that his strength and the secret of success for him lay in silence and secrecy.

Satisfied that he had performed the work for which he had remained, he vanished amid the shadows as stealthily and as noiselessly as if he were only a shadow himself.

He was scarcely gone from the place, however, when a third party appeared on the scene—a man of heavy features and powerful physique. His face was barely visible in the semi-darkness that lay on the landscape. But it was a round, fat face, placid and good-humored—the face of one who looks after the good things of life, and who proposes to let care go hang!

Such, indeed, was Jumbo Griggs, the sergeant of the military post of the border. Jumbo he was called because of his bulk, which was almost elephantine.

His hands were thrust into his pockets, and he was swinging along very leisurely, having caught sight of the light from one of the windows of the prospector's abode some time before, but seemingly careless about how soon he reached the shelter it indicated. He was wondering if he would be fortunate enough to secure a warm supper and a comfortable bed, and debating whether he preferred tea to coffee, in case Toltec had those luxuries and should ask him to make a choice between them, when his foot tripped against the body of the prostrate man, and he sprawled full length in the narrow trail.

"By the great Cæsar! What was that, now?" he questioned, rubbing his bruises ruefully and staring into the gloom.

A faint moan came as if in answer to the inquiry.

Jumbo, in spite of his large frame, was quick to act in an emergency. He "pulled himself together" and stepped to the side of the unknown. His fingers detected the strangling cord, and his knife severed it at almost the same moment. Then he flashed the light of a match into the face of the insensible man.

"Phew!" and a low whistle escaped the sergeant's lips. "By all that's mysterious! that's Dillon, as I'm a living sinner! And what is he doing here with that devilish cord around his neck?"

He did not waste time in vain questioning, however. He drew the young man away from the trail as a measure of precaution, and then set vigorously to work to bring the life back to the almost inanimate form. There were faint pulsations at the heart, enough to show that he had not come too late, if he worked with speed and judgment.

Jumbo had seen more than one man who was considered as good as dead and who had been restored to his former vigor, and he had had experience with such cases, which was just then worth more than all else. And so he set about his task with a hopefulness that promised the fullest measure of success.

In a few minutes the pulsations became firmer and stronger, and a regularity in breathing was set up; and in a quarter of an hour Dillon, clothed in his right mind, was sitting at Jumbo's

bo's side, conversing in a voice that was faint and weak, but which was constantly becoming fuller and less husky.

"And you don't know who did it?" Jumbo questioned, with an air of surprise.

"Haven't the ghost of an idea!" averred Dillon. "But he was a sly one, for I never so much as heard a sound."

"It's a good thing I came along just then, for in a few minutes more you'd have been past all help. How have you found things?"

Dillon's first thought was of Margaret, but he hesitated to speak of her.

"Fine!" was the reply, after a moment. "I'm on first-class terms with the old gent, already. He's just as they say at the post: Crazy as a bumblebee about a lot of lost treasure. He has invited me to stay at his house, and we can make it our headquarters."

"And the Chinese?" Jumbo queried.

"Haven't seen a single Celestial!"

This rather regretfully, for he had come into those wastes for the express purpose of running to earth the men who were engaged in the criminal business of transporting Chinese across the border.

"They can't be far from here, though!" Jumbo asserted. "Parties of them have been seen on a few occasions in the hills; and the men who are helping them across must hole up here somewhere."

And Jumbo was as much interested in finding some trace of these rascals as was Dillon, for he was Dillon's ally and assistant.

Both came from the same post, were acting under the same orders, with only this difference: Dillon was in command. He was to carry on the search, while Jumbo was to hold himself ready to bring a squad of men across the mountains to gobble up the band, whenever Dillon should succeed in locating it.

"We'd better go on to the house," Jumbo suggested, remembering his supperless condition. "I'm hollow, clean to my boots. That was a terrible tramp, and I made it since sunrise. I hope old Rainbow-chaser keeps a good cook."

Dillon arose rather unsteadily, and found that he was too giddy to stand, not to mention walking.

"Then I'll have to carry you!" Jumbo declared, with easy complacency.

And, without further ado, he lifted the injured man gently to his herculean shoulders and tramped heavily on toward the house.

CHAPTER V.

THE POST TRAITOR.

"DIP those paddles a little less clumsily, will ye?" snarled the harsh voice of Captain Basil. "You'll wake the soldiers at Fort Mesquite, at that rate!"

Captain Basil was in an exceptionally bad humor that night. Matters had not gone pleasantly. In the first place one of his men had reported that the young fellow whom Paou had tried to put out of the way, the night before, was still alive. And in the second, the men he had sent to convoy a body of Chinese from a point on the California Gulf had been chased by a lot of troopers and made but a narrow escape.

This same body of Chinese he was now ferrying across the Colorado from the Lower Californian side to the soil of Uncle Sam's dominions, and had just been listening to a detailed account of the chase and the brush with the soldiers.

The craft used in making the passage of the river was a large, flat-bottomed, unwieldy concern, which when in the center of the current was almost unmanageable.

"Mind your eyes, there!" he called out, sharply. "You'll have all of us in the river! Now, pull! Pull hard!"

The men bent obediently to the oars, and after a protracted struggle drove the nose of the boat against the American shore.

"Now, out with you. And, Paou, keep these boobies well together. If you don't, they'll get lost, sure. They're the dumbest lot we've handled yet. How they've ever managed to get this far beats me."

Paou huddled the bewildered Celestials into a compact body; while Flint continued to ejaculate his instructions in that vexed, rasping tone.

There was no light; and though the wind was chill, no fire was there on the shore to give out its warmth. Save the dip of the paddles, and the captain's commands, together with occasional whispers among the men, no sounds arose. In addition the night was dark and starless; and the stream raced beneath the boat's keel like a river of ink.

It was a night favorable for such a venture. A night for secrecy and dark deeds.

And yet, when Basil Flint arose from his position in the stern of the boat and turned his eyes shoreward, he saw the faint outline of a horse and rider among the shadows.

His revolver came out instantly.

"It's all right, captain!" the shadow hastily called, as the "click, click" of the weapon sounded ominously. "I'm Silcott, from the post!"

Captain Basil leaped from the boat and advanced toward the horseman.

"Look after things, will you, Paou? And get everything ready for traveling. Hide the boat in the old place, and make sure its concealed so no one can find it. And keep your beathen friends from babbling too much. They're beginning to chatter like sparrows. There's no telling who may be around."

Then, taking the bridle-rein in his hand he turned the horse away from the camp, halting when he had reached what he considered a safe distance.

"How in thunder did you manage to find us, Smith?" he asked, with some uneasiness. "We crossed at a new point to-night! We haven't been making too much noise, have we?"

"I didn't hear anything till I came almost on you," said the horseman. "Then I heard you growling away like a bull-dog!"

Flint accepted the criticism with good grace, though he disliked to be told of his faults. But Smith Silcott was a man who could criticize the irritable captain with perfect safety; for Smith Silcott was a more valuable man than even Paou, if that were possible.

"Yes; you were growling away like a bull-dog," Silcott repeated. "You ought to keep your temper, captain, on a trip like this! I don't think there's anybody around to-night; but we can't always be sure of that. And another night there may be. I'm just from the post. Came down since dark. I told the colonel I wanted to run over to the little town across the range. I didn't stay there only long enough to prove I'd been there, if such a thing should become necessary, and then cut sticks for the river."

"I've ridden like an Apache, captain, and will be stiff as the deuce, to-morrow, I'll warrant. I didn't find you at the old place, and so kept on down, and struck you here."

He was rattling on in a rapid way, but in low tones, when the impatient captain cut him short.

"Stow all that, Silcott, and come to the point! What's up? Something, or you wouldn't be here on such a night as this!"

"Right you are!" the horseman averred. "There is something up. The colonel has taken it into his head to send out a couple of men to see if they can't locate the band that's loading the Chinese onto the country. They're in this vicinity, now, or my information is wrong. One is the post sergeant, Jumbo Griggs, and the other is Philip Dillon."

Captain Basil uttered a bitter curse.

"I've seen one of them," he declared; and then went on to tell of the visit of the stranger to the island.

"That was Dillon," answered Silcott. "Jumbo didn't take a horse. And, besides, Jumbo's a much larger man than the one you describe."

"Well, they're laying for you, and you'll have to be mighty careful about your fires and all that. It's been reported, too, that two or three squads of Chinese have been seen crossing the hills. But it was always in the night, and they couldn't be followed, which is a very fortunate thing."

As the reader scarcely needs to be told, Smith Silcott was a member of the little force of military stationed at Fort Mesquite. He was, also, a man trusted by his superiors. The Colonel, Moberly Yates, held him in high regard, and never for a moment dreamed that the man was so wholly unworthy of the confidence thus reposed in him.

How and where Silcott became connected with the disreputable band under Flint was never certainly known, and is a matter of no present importance. But he was, in fact, a member of that band, and receiving a liberal share of its dishonest gains; and masked behind the blue coat of a soldier was acting as a spy for Captain Basil.

"When I found that men were to be sent out to make a hunt for you I asked the colonel to let me be one of the number," he went on. "But I volunteered my valuable services just a little too late. He had already picked out Dillon and Jumbo, and given them their instructions, and didn't want to increase the force. He would have let me go, anyway, I feel sure, only that Dillon objected to my company."

There was a tinge of wrathful ire in the tones, at this juncture.

"He's never liked me. Dillon hasn't; though just why I can't discover. I'm half afraid, sometimes, that he suspects what I'm really up to. It would have been a big thing if I could have worked myself in as the leader."

"You bet!" Flint assented.

"But you see, I couldn't seem too anxious about it!" in an explanatory tone. "The colonel sets a good deal of store by me, and a wrong move might rouse him to distrust and so spoil everything."

"If I just *could* have got in, though!" and he rubbed his hands nervously together. "What a chase I would have led them!"

"But ye didn't!" declared the captain. "And, now, what do you propose to do?"

"I've brought a warning, which ought to be worth something."

"And 'tis! Worth a good deal!"

"And I'll manage, in some way, to keep you posted concerning the reports they send in."

"And if they should make a discovery?" Basil questioned anxiously.

"Why, if it goes that far, I'll volunteer to lead the force that will be sent against you; and I'll lead it so it will not find you too soon. Trust me to work that all right. I'll get word to you, somehow. And then you'll have to lay snug in the cave till the trouble and excitement blows over. Of course, I'll not be able to find you in the cave!"

"No, of course not!" and Captain Basil laughed in spite of his low spirits.

"And had I better try to lay these fellows out?" he continued.

"If you get a good chance, and there's no danger but you can make sure work of it. But, there must be no balks!"

Then the post traitor wheeled his horse about and was soon lost to sight in the darkness, leaving Flint to ponder over the news he had brought.

CHAPTER VI.

CLEVERLY CAUGHT.

JUMBO GRIGGS was as much taken by surprise as had been his friend Dillon, on discovering so beautiful a girl as Margaret in that lonely mountain cabin. But his heavy features and lethargic manner enabled him to conceal his surprise much more effectually.

"I say, Phil! she's a beauty!" he whispered to his friend at the first opportunity. "By Jove, it's a shame to keep her up here! What do you say to punching the head of old What's-his-name? He deserves it!"

Dillon's only answer was a sigh, and a glance in the direction of the object of Jumbo's remarks.

"Hit hard, eh?" and Jumbo laughed musically. "Well, I don't blame you. I was about to fall down and worship her myself; but if you're feeling that way—"

"Don't be silly, Griggs!" Dillon protested. "Wait till anybody falls down, will you?"

"No need to wait, my dear boy. There's a fellow about your heft who is flat, prostrate in the dust! Why, it's writ in red marks all across your forehead: 'Here's a fellow shot through and through by a feather from Cupid's quiver.'"

Dillon flushed guiltily, and avowed that his friend was mistaken. But all the while he was taking secret pleasure in the thought that Jumbo had thus as good as promised not to become his rival.

The latter had been made as heartily welcome by the old prospector as Dillon; and the kindness of Margaret and of the Toltec serving-woman was lavished equally on both. They were asked no disagreeable questions as to their intentions, but were "made at home" after the fashion of true Western hospitality.

Dillon believed he would be able for duty on the following morning, but when that morning came he found himself almost unable to move his head. The cord of the strangler had pressed heavily and cruelly against the muscles and veins of the neck and throat. In consequence he was wholly unfit for duty, and was forced to postpone indefinitely the work he had come thither to prosecute. But the blackest cloud has its silver lining, and Dillon found much to reconcile him to his fate.

"I suppose it's Providential," philosophically decided Jumbo, heaving a massive sigh. "Something ought to be done, in this case, and you're chosen as the instrument. I'm never chosen for anything! But, it don't matter. Just look your best and talk your prettiest, and in a week you can carry her down to the post. She's wasting all her sweetness on the desert air up here!"

"I wish I might; hanged if I don't!" Dillon declared, heartily.

"Go in, then; I'm backing you!" and Jumbo lighted his pipe and whistled a bar of a favorite air. "Old Mrs. Miggs is getting too uppish. We need another woman down there. The colonel's wife don't count, you know, for Mrs. M. just walks over her like a hard-footed burro on a mountain trail. You can let old Rainbow-chaser come and see her once in awhile, and that will pacify him."

But Dillon was not in a joking mood, and Jumbo took a pull at his pipe, and changed the subject.

The big fellow was not insensible to the charms of Margaret. But he was not a "ladies' man," as he had often declared. If he had not seen how hard hit his friend Dillon was, he might have entertained something like serious thoughts toward the fair Margaret. But he was too loyal a friend for that. Still, it was pleasant to tip his chair against the wall, when conversation lagged, and view the many charms of their hostess through the veil of tobacco smoke that drifted across his face. And at such times, a monster sigh would now and then escape from his huge chest. But the sigh would be instantly concealed by a yawn, and his broad face would give no sign.

Dillon improved very slowly, and for three days was scarcely able to leave the house. Toltec Tom was absent much of that time, on that interminable hunt for the lost treasure. To Jumbo this state of affairs began to grow intolerable. It was worse than the inactivity of the post, for there the daily drills and routine exercises helped to fill up the hours.

He could not forever sit in his favorite corner and puff tobacco smoke up the wide-throated chimney while watching the glowing beauty of Margaret. And Dillon, since his infatuation, had become the poorest possible company.

"I'll make myself scarce awhile!" he mused, one day. "I ain't giving the young fellow a square deal. How's he ever going to make up to the girl if I sit around and watch her all the time? I'm a blooming idiot!"

With this, he took his hat and strolled out along the mountain-side.

It was almost sundown. The ranges were afire with the glory of the fading day, and the shadows were already deepening in the valley. There was almost as much poetry as there was good humor in the bulky frame of Jumbo; and he greatly enjoyed a stroll at such an hour.

"I hope he'll make hay while I'm gone!" he declared, as he walked on toward the rocky barriers. "She's as fine a specimen of woman as I've seen in many a day. 'Twould be a good match. 'Deed it would. Not many finer. If matters had only been otherwise! But, pshaw! they are never otherwise with me. I guess my cake was dough before it ever went into the flour barrel."

"But I'm a soldier, and shall always be a soldier, very likely; and I've always held that a soldier should not marry."

Then he began to speculate concerning the movements of Toltec. He had been shown the mysterious writing, and his inflammable fancy had been somewhat fired by the story of the prospector, though he had not given so much as a sign. Now he wondered if there could be any truth in the old Toltec legend. If there was, and the "Rainbow-chaser," as he frequently designated the old man, should stumble on its place of concealment, the latter would be rich beyond computation.

"Hanged, if I don't keep an eye out for that cave, too!" he mentally ejaculated, seating himself on a stone beside the trail. "Such a find would be a windfall to your humble servant in the present depressed state of his exchequer!"

He endeavored to recall the description of the place, as it was described by Toltec, and to speculate on the probable amount of wealth those old priests had gathered about them.

He was deep in these rosy dreams when a slight rustling came to his quick ear. It had not been louder than the flutter of a wind-blown leaf, but Jumbo's hearing was of the best. Wheeling quickly, he caught a glimpse of a dark form as it writhed into concealment behind the nearest greasewood. It was the form of Paou!

Captain Basil had taken counsel of his fears, and had reached the determination to sacrifice the men who had been bold enough to advance upon him thus in his own territory for the purpose of bringing to naught his carefully-laid plans. And Paou, the thug, shod with silence, and armed with his favorite cord, had been deputed to the dangerous work.

With an agility remarkable for a man of his

bulk, Jumbo leaped to his feet and darted toward the concealing greasewood. Seeing he was discovered, Paou sprang lightly away, fleeing up the slope with the speed of a deer.

It was an unequal race, for the thug was much the fleetest runner, and would unquestionably have escaped but for one of those accidents which sometimes interfere to change the regular course of events. Looking back to ascertain if he was outstripping his pursuer, he set his foot into a narrow aperture in the rocks. In this opening the foot was caught and held as if in a trap, and with a sharp cry of pain and surprise, he tumbled headlong. Before he could rise, Jumbo was upon him.

"Ah! you brown-skinned, slant-eyed, little devil, you!" he growled, grasping Paou by the long queue which had escaped from its coil. "I've a good notion to knife you where you lie. What did you mean by sneaking on me in that way? Answer me that, will you?"

Paou was writhing and twisting in much anxiety and pain.

"You're the villain that tried to choke the life out of Dillon, eh?" catching sight of the cord. "And you thought to serve me the same way? I ought to send you over the divide for that!"

Paou, realizing he could not break away, had become quiet and motionless, but his eyes roved in a restless way from the face of his captor to the thickets near by. They sparkled dully as they settled on a knife at Jumbo's waist.

The sergeant caught the look and quickly transferred the weapon to an inner pocket. Then he drew and cocked a revolver.

"You'll find I ain't sleeping, you lily-livered cur! and if you try any more nonsense on me, you'll wish you hadn't. Now, what's your name, and what sort of a lay are you onto?"

He had shoved the Chinese from him, but held him covered with the threatening revolver.

Paou remained doggedly silent, and refused to answer any questions.

"Likely you can't speak 'Melican.' Of course you belong to the band of rascals that has been up to so much dirt lately. I suppose I ought to take you into custody and send you on to the post. But I won't!"

He grasped Paou again by the queue and lifted him to a standing posture.

"If you can't understand good English, as it's rendered by yours truly, perhaps you can understand the language of signs. Take that, and that! and tell your master, whoever the scamp may be, that if I catch any more of his Hessians in these parts, I'll make them up into sausage for the coyotes!"

He gave the thug two such heavy kicks that the latter howled with pain, and when released darted into the greasewood and disappeared with almost inconceivable speed.

"No doubt I'll be sorry I let the fellow go!" Jumbo mused, as he looked at the point where Paou had vanished.

And future events hastened to prove that in this he was something of a prophet.

CHAPTER VII.

STRANGE HAPPENINGS.

DILLON improved but slowly in the days immediately succeeding. He was able to get about the house, and felt that he was improving, but was in no condition to prosecute with vigor the work he had been sent to do.

In this state of affairs Jumbo volunteered to take up the task assigned to his friend and carry it out to the best of his ability.

"If you only will, Jumbo!" said Dillon, his face lighting. "It's worrying me to death to lie around this way, of no more benefit than a stick or a clod."

"Perhaps I can cut out the way," Jumbo ventured, modestly. "Clear off the brush, as you might say! I'm not up to this kind of work, as you are; but I can do my best."

He set about his self-appointed task with great carefulness, feeling he must make up in thoroughness what he lacked in experience.

His first act was to draw the old prospector into a long conversation concerning the country adjacent to the river, and to make cautious inquiries on lines that might aid him.

"Are we the first visitors you've ever had here, Toltec?" he asked, puffing placidly at his pipe.

The answer was in the affirmative.

"And you've never seen anybody else in these hills? Seems to me that would make it terrible lonesome."

The prospector gave him a keen glance.

"I never said jist that, did I? I've seen a good many people in these hills. More'n I've wanted to see, by a jugful!"

"Ah!" and there was the faintest trace of curiosity in Jumbo's tones. "Then, I misunderstood you. Were they white or red?"

"Neither!" snarled Toltec. "They was yaller."

"Um-huh! Yellow!" rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "A queer place for cattle like them."

Jumbo had not told Toltec of his encounter with Paou.

"Yes; an' not so very queer, either!" Toltec declared. "Them Chinese likes gold, same's do the whites."

"Oh! Hunting for gold?" and Jumbo sagely nodded his head.

"How they ever heard it, I don't know," the old man went on. "But they've got wind of this hyer treasure-lay I'm onto, an' I reckon they 'low there's a chance to git ahead o' me. I've seen 'em several times; sneakin' through the hills, an' slidin' 'round like shadders."

"Why didn't you follow them?" Jumbo questioned.

"Foller 'em? I did!" and a sly smile crept into the prospector's face. "I follered 'em as fur as I could. Then they'd whisk off, er slide away in the dark, and leave me to pick my way home the best way I knew how."

Other cautious queries drew from Toltec the points at which he had at various times seen these parties of Chinese; and having gained this much information, slight as it was, Jumbo set about his work.

By much mental calculation, and a study of the topography of the country, he came to a conclusion as to the place where the Chinese would be most likely to cross from the soil of Mexico to that of the United States. Then he set off down the river, watching and narrowly inspecting every foot of the way.

For dreary days and nights he lay on the bleak mountain slopes, or crept from divide to divide, and depression to depression. Yet he saw nothing to convince him that he was making any headway, until late one evening, when he came on fresh footprints in the river sand. There was also an indentation which looked as if it might have been made by a canoe.

Jumbo grew somewhat excited at this find, though his outward calm did not forsake him.

Withdrawing to a point in the hills whence a good view of the river and the valley could be obtained, he remained there throughout the day. Nothing occurred to reward him. With intense pertinacity he continued his watch on into the night; and when he began to think the night was also going to pass without bringing him any reward, a party of men suddenly appeared on the shore.

They were principally Chinese. He could see that, though the light was far from good. And they were led by white men.

"Struck ile!" he asseverated, controlling his joy and flattening himself lizard-like upon the rocks. "If that ain't the crowd I'm looking for, then I'm not worth a cent at guessing!"

As he watched, a large boat, the one that had made the imprint in the sand, was rowed into view, and in it the party slowly embarked, and were rowed toward the opposite shore.

Fearful lest he might lose the game, now he had sighted it, he hurried to the water's edge, and plunging in, swam quickly across.

Then, without stopping to squeeze the water from his dripping garments, he stole silently toward the point where the Chinese had made the passage of the stream.

They were there, still, being compacted into an orderly body by Paou.

"The scamp!" wheezed Jumbo, choking back a curse. "I ought to have shot the fellow when I had such a fine chance, and an excuse that would have eased somebody's conscience. But my finer sensibilities are always getting away with me."

The Chinese were in motion; and as they trailed away through the hills, Jumbo dogged their footsteps.

Day was near at hand. This both aided and retarded the pursuer. The increasing light enabled him to follow the party with more ease, but it at the same time exposed him somewhat, as there were many open places he was compelled to cross. But he kept on, notwithstanding this, determined to run the party down, now that he had them in sight.

He was painfully made aware of the extreme peril of this, a half an hour later. Creeping beneath a pinone for temporary shelter while watching the Chinese as they toiled over a ridge far in advance, he failed to note the forms crouching low in the branches. His first intimation that an enemy was near came when the forms loosed their hold and dropped on him.

They were Paou and another Chinaman; and

as they came down on the unsuspecting man they tossed over his head a pair of net-like bags that dropped down over his arms and limbs and bound him the tighter the more he strove to escape.

It was useless to struggle, even worse than useless, as he was soon discovered. The folds of the bags enveloped him more and more at every turn. So he gave up the attempt and scornfully stared at his captors.

"Oh, it's you, Old Almond-eyes?" looking straight into the face of Paou. "I'll kick myself for a blamed fool, just the first chance I get. See if I don't! If only I'd laid you out that day!"

To his great amazement he received a reply in very good English.

"It was not to be. Fate favored Paou!"

But he was not permitted time in which to speculate on this. A number of Chinese swarmed out of the nearest scrub and came running nimbly to the aid of their countrymen. Obviously they had been lying there waiting for their friends to effect the capture of the bold American.

At a word of command two of these stripped from the captive the enveloping bags, looping at the same moment some cunningly-knotted ropes about his arms and legs. Almost before he was aware of their intentions Jumbo found himself strongly bound, so strongly that he could scarcely move his hands. But his feet were comparatively free, the bonds being so adjusted that he was able to take short and mincing steps, a fact which would be of small aid to him should he try to break away.

Then, with Jumbo in their center, the crowd set off at a slow walk, turning aside from the direction taken by the first party.

Flint had given his Chinese lieutenant *carte blanche* as to the disposition to be made of their pursuer, in case of his capture; and Paou, smarting under the indignity he had received at the hands of the post sergeant, had determined to reap a terrible revenge.

When the trail taken by the first party had been left a half-mile behind, Paou's men turned into a rocky gorge, which had at its further end a narrow, black opening, wholly invisible a few feet away. This opening they pressed into; and the sergeant, looking about him, saw that it widened away into a dimly-lighted cave.

There were several galleries putting off at various angles, but they did not endeavor to explore or look into any of these, but contented themselves with stopping in the central chamber. This was a low-vaulted affair; with a light which made it passable, once the eyes became accustomed to it.

To Jumbo's surprise, there was an ancient-appearing post of dark, time-stained wood, set in the earth not far from the middle of the chamber. To this post he was bound, without having been allowed time to speculate as to its former uses.

The first rays of the newly-risen sun were lighting up the outer world; and, catching sight of a dancing beam which found its way in some mysterious manner to that underground place, Jumbo wondered if he would be permitted ever to look again on the radiant face of day.

Paou had collected the knives of his companions, which he placed in two equal heaps on the ground. The sergeant, watching him questioningly, noticed that there were just six knives in each heap.

"What are you going to do with them?" he asked, bravely, though he felt an inward, nervous tremor.

Paou smiled—a sardonic, ghastly smile, which made his countenance seem fiendish in the uncertain light.

"A wise man does not question the future. The present has ills enough."

In the midst of his anxiety the sergeant could not fail to note the marvelous accuracy of Paou's speech. He had never heard anything like it, and he had met hundreds of Chinese. He wondered if the fellow was really a native of the Celestial Empire.

The thug and his partner, the one who had been concealed with him in the branches of the pinone, now took up the knives, stationing themselves ten or twelve feet from the bound man. Then Paou, with a quick, dextrous twirl launched one of the knives at the sergeant. Like a flash of light it sped through the air, struck the post, and remained fixed and quivering, within an inch of the prisoner's head!

In spite of the firm control which he fancied he had over his nerves, Jumbo dodged and cringed, as he saw the knife leave the thug's hand.

The ring of excited Chinese set up a pleasur-

able shout, in testimony of their appreciation of the skill of the thrower; and Jumbo, who had seen similar performances on the sawdust arena of various circuses, was also struck with Paou's dexterity, notwithstanding the uncomfortable sensation it had given him.

Another knife whizzed through the air, flashing like silver as in its passage it was touched momentarily by the vagrant sunbeam. It struck the post on the side opposite to that touched by the first, and likewise remained quivering in uncomfortable proximity to Jumbo's cranium.

"If you dodge that way, you'll be hurt!" Paou cautioned, for the sergeant had flinched this time as before. "If you're to be killed, though, you can't help it. It is fate!"

With this pleasant reflection he again poised a knife in his tapering fingers and shot it through the air.

Jumbo believed they intended to put his nerves to the severest possible test, torture him to the verge of insanity with those cruel, threatening knives, and then end his misery by a swift, well-aimed thrust, which should come with the unexpectedness of fate. And believing this he endeavored to steel his nerves and meet death with a heroism becoming a brave man and a soldier.

After that, though the knives frequently grazed his flesh and cut through locks of his hair, he never winced, nor by so much as the movement of a muscle showed that he fancied each thrust might be the fatal one.

Suddenly this delightful occupation of the Chinese was brought to an abrupt end. One of their number, more curious than the rest, had, in poking about the central chamber, come upon a strange object in the opening of one of the galleries.

With a cry of astonishment he drew it forth, and with some difficulty bore it toward his wondering countrymen, who gathered about it with much chattering.

They had never seen anything like it, and were inclined to regard it with fear, as they did all the curious inventions of the strange, new world into which they had come.

But Jumbo, although he was as much astonished as any of them, knew at a glance the nature of the strange thing that had been so singularly brought to light. But how had it come there? for it was nothing less than that wonderful talking instrument known as a graphophone!

There was on it a roll; and perceiving this, new hope rose in his breast. Perhaps the roll had been used, and so would reproduce the sounds that had been given it.

"It is the talking-machine of the gods!" he declared, in a voice that could be heard by all, and which was understood by others than Paou.

The latter cast on him a glance of scorn, though the natural superstition of his race, which had not been eradicated by time and alienation from his country, caused him to regard the instrument with a feeling akin to awe and fear.

"Press the treadle up and down and see if I am not right!" urged the sergeant, thinking his fate would only be death, even if his guess proved incorrect. "That thing there at the bottom. Work it up and down, and see if what I say isn't the truth."

The instrument was one which had evidently been used for exhibition purposes, for it was fitted with a funnel-shaped device for increasing the volume of sound. Jumbo also saw that the diaphragm was properly placed for reproducing sounds.

With an air that was half fearful, but which yet held something of bravado and scorn, Paou pressed the treadle up and down. For an instant there was heard a humming and sputtering; then words issued from the marvelous little machine with startling distinctness. Paou took his foot from the treadle and started back with a cry of fear, while the others seemed on the point of flight. And yet, not one there could understand a syllable of what had been uttered, not even the sergeant! The sentences spoken by the graphophone were in Spanish!

This much Jumbo knew.

"The gods declare they are angry!" he exclaimed, quickly interpreting the communication in his own way. "They will slay you, if I am not released!"

It was an over-bold declaration.

"Melican man tellee heap big lie!" asserted the knife-thrower who had assisted Paou.

The statement brought back Paou's courage.

"We'll kill the lying white man first! Then, if fate wills, we'll die together!" he averred, drawing his knife and poised it for a throw.

He was interrupted by a whizzing sound, and out of the darkness of one of the side passages

shot a rocket. It ricocheted along the floor, struck the wall with a dull thud, exploded, and fell almost in their midst.

Its advent had been the most startling thing that had yet occurred. Yet, strangely enough, it did not frighten the Chinese as had the unintelligible words of the talking-machine. They had, in their own country, been familiar with rockets and fire-works from infancy, and were not to be scared by anything so commonplace.

"The gods will avenge me if I am slain," Jumbo thundered, as much puzzled as they, but bound to take advantage of every circumstance, without stopping to inquire into the cause of mysteries. "It is a sign of their displeasure!"

"Bah!" and Paou gave a contemptuous toss to his head.

Then he commanded his assistant to accompany him, and started toward the passage.

Another rocket whizzed out, passing dangerously near their heads; then another and another!

"The gods will slay you all!" screamed Jumbo, fearful that his unknown friend would be discovered and dragged to the light. "They will kill you all!"

His words seemed prophetic. A blinding flash lit up the cavern, followed by a jarring roar that made the mountain rock. Stones flew like missiles hurled from the throat of some giant cannon. Then Jumbo knew no more. He had been stricken senseless.

CHAPTER VIII.

GRINGO'S COMPLIMENTS.

To return a few hours on the traces of this story.

Captain Basil Flint was far from being reassured by the report brought in by one of his spies, to the effect that the young man who was thought to have been strangled to death by the cord of the Chinese was still alive. These fears were augmented by knowledge of the presence of another stranger at the house of Toltec Tom; and the fears turned to hatred and dread when the character of the men and the nature of their mission were revealed by the post traitor, Smith Silcott.

Paou, who had heretofore been equal to any emergency, had not been able to strike a fatal blow at either; and so Flint set his own crafty wits at work to devise some plan that should rid him of these dangerous foes.

But aside from waylaying and picking them off in the hills he could think of nothing promising success. He had about decided to do this when it occurred to him that possibly Toltec Tom was in their secret. How to ascertain if this might be true he did not know; but he finally sent one of his men to the cabin to investigate, thinking Toltec might betray himself by some inadvertent word or action.

Unfortunately for the success of the mission the man selected by Flint was not at all such a man as so careful a leader should have chosen. He was shrewd and crafty, but his instincts were as coarse and evil as his face; and he had an unconquerable weakness for fiery whisky.

This man, who was known only as Sandy Bill, thought it necessary to brace his courage with some potent rum which he had surreptitiously conveyed to and concealed within the cavern; and as Flint had departed with most of his men to convey a body of Chinese from the Mexican side, the fear of the captain did not act as a check upon his thirst.

And thus it came about that by the time the fellow had gained the vicinity of the prospector's cabin his too frequent potations had so "mellowed" him that he quite forgot the instructions of his chief. He did, however, remember that he was to play a part.

"Lemme shee!" he owlishly soliloquized, steadying himself against a rock and staring down at the cabin nestled in sequestered valley. "Who (hic) am I, 'nway? Yesh! I re'ec'lec'! I'm a gen'lm'n f'um V'ginny City! Thash what I am. A gen'lm'n f'um V'ginny City! An' I'm down thish-a-way lookin' after my gol' mines. You bet. Whoop!"

With this he jammed his hat over his ears and started at a reckless, reeling gait down the slope.

Toltec was not at home, and Jumbo was absent on that mission which was to result so strangely. Dillon was still in a feeble and scarcely convalescent state.

Margaret Grant heard the whoop and saw the drunken ruffian as he staggered down the hill. Her brow clouded, but she gave no sign of tear.

"Hic—mornin', ma'am!" said Sandy, bringing up in front of the door with a lurch and steadying himself by catching hold of one of the logs. "I'm a gen'lm'n f'um V'ginny City!"

She was staring hard at him, which he observed, returning the stare with a wink and a leer.

"My father is not at home!" she replied somewhat curtly.

"Thash all right!" with another leer. "I'm a gen'l'm'n f'um V'ginny City, an' I'm lookin' after my gol' mines down this-a-way."

Dillon overheard the conversation and was coming to lend his aid to Margaret, but before he could do so Sandy Bill crowded by the girl and entered the room. This accomplished he dropped into the nearest chair and surveyed the belongings of the place with a gravity that was decidedly ludicrous.

Having entered and showing no aggressiveness, frontier etiquette forbade that he should be summarily ousted. And so he sat there, drumming the chair with his fingers, and puckering his lips, while he vainly essayed to collect his scattered ideas.

The effort was futile; and after informing Margaret again that he was a gentleman from Virginia City, down that way looking after the interest of his gold mines, he gave up the attempt and contented himself with staring at her as she moved about the apartment.

"Jes' one kiss, me darlin', f'um them ruby, ruby lips!" he implored, catching at her skirts as she passed near him.

"Now you get out of here, without more ado!" cried Dillon angered beyond all bounds. "You get out, or I'll take measures to put you out!"

Sandy Bill stared at him, and noting the pallor of his face and his evident weakened state, settled back in his chair defiantly.

"Pooh!" putting his hand to his mouth and then motioning it toward the young man. "I'll jes' blow my breath onto you (hic) an' knock you over!"

"You might," asserted Dillon. "It's strong enough to knock down an elephant! Now, clear out of here! We've had enough of you!"

He drew his revolver and placed it threateningly on his knee.

"Don't!" implored Margaret.

"Pistols, is it?" and Sandy began to tug at the big navy that swung at his hip. "All—all—hic—right! All right! I'm yer mutton!"

What the result might have been can not be told. But an interruption came in a most unlooked-for way—unlooked for at least by Dillon and Sandy Bill. Gringo, who had been lying unnoticed behind the door, gave a furious growl and sprang upon the intruder, forcing him out of the chair and to the floor. No doubt he had been for some time watching the proceedings with an angry eye, and now thought it time to bear a hand, or rather a tooth.

Sandy Bill gave a yell of terror and strove to get at the maddened brute; and thus struggling the dog and man rolled into the yard. The ruffian's revolver, which he had previously lugged from its case, fell to the earth, and he was thus rendered helpless.

So savage was the brute's onslaught that in a very few seconds Sandy Bill must have rendered up his earthly account had not Margaret sprung to his rescue. The dog, docile to her even in his rage, released his hold at her command and retired, sullen and growling.

And Sandy, as soon as he was free from those lacerating teeth, tarried not, but broke into a brisk run, heading for the mountains.

Considering his drunken condition, it was surprising how the rascal could run. Time and again, striking his feet against some obstruction, he fell headlong. But he scrambled up quickly, and with a backward glance of terror, plunged on.

"Good Gringo! Good Gringo!" exclaimed Margaret, patting the dog's head. "You thought it time to put in, did you? You should have waited for orders, sir!"

But Gringo did not understand the nature of the rebuke, though he knew the tones were kindly, and so wagged his shaggy tail and frisked about his mistress in playful delight.

Dillon had been in a thoughtful mood all day, and his thoughtfulness was increased by the encounter with Sandy Bill.

For some time he sat in silence, his eyes following the movements of Gringo. Ina was away, gathering herbs in the hills.

"I should think you'd find this a very lonely and almost unendurable life," he ventured, finally, his face at the same time flushing in a most unaccountable way. "You can never tell when you may be insulted by such scamps as that one."

"I have Gringo," she said. "And you have observed that, as a guardian, he has excellent qualities."

There was something in his tone that caused

her to flush, too; and abandoning Gringo to his own amusements, she stepped again into the house and began to busy herself about the household duties.

"I have offended you," asserted Dillon, in a deprecatory tone, following her within the building. "Believe me, it was unintentional."

"No offense at all!" she replied.

"I have been thinking all day how I might speak to you!" made bolder by the confession, and yet scarcely daring to look at her. "You must know what I mean, Margaret! What has been in my heart all these days."

She did not reply, though the tell-tale color mounted hotly to her brow.

He drew near, seized one of her hands and bent over her.

"I cannot let so excellent an opportunity escape," his face pale, his hands trembling, and his breath coming in short, quick respirations. "I love you, Margaret; and have from the day I first saw you! Do not tell me that it is in vain!"

Her slight form swayed like a reed and she dropped her face to her hands and began to sob violently.

Dillon was not an experienced hand at love-making and knew not whether to take this as a good or ill omen.

However, the fact that she had not absolutely repulsed him strengthened his shaking courage; and taking advantage of her posture he bent forward and imprinted a kiss upon her cheek.

She lifted her head as does the frightened fawn and drew away.

"Oh! Do not talk to me that way!" she pleaded. "Think how short a time you have known me."

"I have thought of it!" Dillon persisted. "Thought of it till my head has spun round like a top. And I can say that if I had known you for a thousand years instead of three weeks I could not love you any more than I do now!"

This was strong language, but lovers do not measure words by line and rule.

"Tell me that my love is returned!" he persisted. "I know, I feel that it is; but I want the assurance from your own dear lips!"

Her breast heaved tumultuously, but she remained silent.

"You do care for me, just a little, do you not?" he pleaded.

"I do!" was the low answer, but keeping herself at arm's length. "But, father is all in all to me. You must talk to him, first. I cannot say more, now. Please do not urge."

"And if I can gain his consent you will promise to become my wife?"

"I cannot promise anything until after you have talked with him. There, I must finish my work. Now, do not bother me any more!"

With this, she gave a captivating toss to her head and tore her hand from his, smiling bewitchingly and defiantly as she hurried across the floor; and Dillon, pierced through and through by the arrows of the little god, loved her more than ever.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ABANDONED SHOWMAN.

How Jumbo Griggs got out of the cave he scarcely knew. He remembered, as in a dream, the terrific explosion, the flying of stone fragments, the rocking of the great walls. Then came a blank, from which he partially recovered. He recollected that one of the knives which had been hurled so near him by the juggling knife-throwers had become bent down so that his bound hand could readily grasp it. With that he sawed asunder the cords that held him, and so stumbled from the cave, which was as quiet and apparently as untenanted as it must have been at creation's dawn.

He was now in the open air, with the cavern far behind him, and so weak he could barely lift his aching head.

All that had passed appeared so like the phantasmagoria which troubles a restless dreamer, that he found much difficulty in convincing himself he had not really been asleep and imagined it. But his aching head and the rents in his clothing where the knives had pierced and scratched the skin, told him that what he had seen and heard was indeed a reality.

"Just knocks the spots out of anything I ever thought of!" he declared, rising to his feet with difficulty. "What will happen next? I'm clean past being surprised at anything."

Then he recalled the flight of the rockets, and wondered who his unknown friend could be, and what had become of him; for he was sure some one with intentions kindly to him had been in the passage.

"Maybe he's dead! That explosion was

enough to have shaken the life out of the Old Boy himself. I ought to look him up and say 'thankee,' anyway."

But he found his strength unequal to the wish. If he could manage to crawl to the home of the prospector, it was all he could hope to accomplish.

In spite of his shaking limbs and throbbing head he forced himself along the path that led up the mountain-side. It was a wearisome way, but he had the day before him. So with many halts and frequent restings he kept on, and about the middle of the afternoon looked down on the home of the prospector from the swelling divide.

He had gained strength with the passage of the hours. His head no longer throbbed so painfully, and the weakness had in a measure passed from his limbs. But he was thoroughly tired out, and so hungry that, as he declared, he could have eaten "raw dog."

Toltec Tom had returned, and when the latter saw Jumbo descending the slope in that limping and feeble way, he hurried to meet and assist him to the house.

"I'll tell you all about it," the sergeant said, in answer to the string of inquiries which fell from the lips of the old prospector. "But, first, I want to get to the house, and see if I can find something with which to wedge up the yawning cavity that exists in my stomach. Hungry? Toltec, I'm famished. If I can once more thrust my legs beneath your mahogany and clasp a chunk of the staff of life I'll feel that I haven't struggled on this far in vain."

Toltec saw the earnestness beneath the bantering manner, and forbore further questioning until the house had been gained and the sergeant had in some degree appeased his raging appetite.

"I'd eat more," surveying the empty dishes with a wistful look, "if I wasn't afraid of bringing a seven-year's famine on the whole outfit."

"And, now, I suppose you want my story?" wheeling from the table and facing the anxious group before him. "Well, my lords and ladies, you shall have it."

And forthwith, in his inimitable way, he gave a running account of all that had befallen him.

Toltec was much impressed with the description of the cave.

"Was they a tunnel leadin' to it?" he queried at the first opportunity. "Maby it's the cave I've been a-lookin' fer all this time. Say, was they a tunnel?"

Jumbo was obliged to tell him he did not remember seeing one.

"Tain't the place less'n they's a tunnel," the old man persisted. "Queer, though, how I never knowed they was sich a thing there, and me been a-huntin' the country over above ground and below, as ye might say."

But Dillon and Margaret, and even the Toltec serving woman, were more interested in the mysteries connected with the sergeant's story; and especially were they taken with the theory that some brave and unknown friend had coped with and beaten off the furious Chinese.

"And he may be dead, or suffering terribly this minute!" and a tear of pity dropped like a pearl from Margaret's eye.

"I'd lead the way back, if I was able to walk!" declared Jumbo, anxiously. "If Dillon was only strong enough you might sling me on a stretcher, and so take me along to point out the way. I can't tell you, for I'd have to keep a mighty close watch if I found it myself. But, pshaw! Dillon couldn't tote nothing, now."

In addition, the day was drawing to a close; and in consideration of this, and the weakness of Griggs and Dillon, it was decided to postpone any attempt to reach the cave until the following morning.

At daylight, however, they were astir, and Dillon having declared that he was much stronger and proposed to accompany his friends, the three set out from the little cabin before the sun had fairly touched the tops of the tall mountain peaks.

Jumbo did not experience the difficulty in finding the cavern which he had anticipated.

As they neared its narrow portals, Toltec scanned the rocks closely for traces of the tunnel he hoped to find. There was nothing of the kind visible. Instead, the walls quickly opened upon a gloomy cave.

There was nothing to indicate that Paou and his Chinese had ever been there, as related by Jumbo, with the exception of the severed rope strands and two or three knives sticking in the central post. No person could be seen. Obviously if any of the Chinese had been slain by the hurtling stones they had been borne away by their friends.

The graphophone was found overturned, but uninjured, near the spot where it had delivered the mysterious Spanish sentences.

"This is the gallery from which the rockets came!" explained Jumbo, leading the way over the uneven surface, piled with loose stones.

Dillon and Toltec crowded close at his heels, their faces showing even in the dim light their intense eagerness and anxiety.

"For God's sake, will you devils not let me die in peace?"

The words, accompanied by a hollow groan, came from within the passage, and the trio huddled into a startled and half-frightened group.

Jumbo was the first to recover. Whipping out his weapons, he hurried in the direction from which the voice came.

"Bring a torch or two, Toltec!" he shouted back. "There are some near the post."

Toltec obeyed; and soon the torches were flickering in the tunnel draft.

Looking down they saw the haggard face of a man staring at them.

"Saved!" came from the pallid lips, as the poor creature attempted to start up.

There was no need for words or explanations. Jumbo and the prospector lifted the man tenderly and bore him to the entrance of the cave. Then some water was brought for the stranger, which, mingled with some liquor from the sergeant's flask, brought the color again to his cheeks, and put new life into him.

Then the friends were privileged to listen to a strange story:

The man, whose name was Guy Somers, was a showman, and with a small company had been giving exhibitions in the mining towns of the Southwest. They had started across the country for Mexico, where they expected to open in a short time. Near the cave they had been attacked by bandits.

"I think it must have been the men you speak of as engaged in the importation of coolies," said Somers, thoughtfully, at this point in the narrative. "They probably mistook us for officers or agents of the Government, and thought it wise to put us out of the way."

A staunch and gallant fight had been made. The showmen had sought refuge in the cave. Somers was wounded, and supposed by his comrades to be dead. In the night the latter slipped out and away with the animals. When Somers revived he found himself alone, with nothing for company save the graphophone, which had been overlooked or abandoned in the haste of flight, and a quantity of rockets that had belonged to the supplies of the show.

The abandoned man had crept as far into the tunnel as his weakness would permit, and had there fainted from exhaustion.

When he revived again he had made a search of the place, finding a small quantity of provisions, and a water-bottle filled with water, these also having been left by his friends. By this means he had been able to subsist.

Only once had the Chinese paid the place a visit, and then they did not remain long enough to make any discoveries. Only a short time before Jumbo had been brought there a prisoner, Somers's supply of water had failed, and he had been thinking seriously of venturing out for more. Then Paou and his band had come with their captive, and to save the life of the latter Somers had fired the rockets and the powder-train, which had produced the great explosion.

"We fixed up that powder magazine in the rocks to blow up besiegers as well as ourselves if it should become necessary!" and the showman smiled grimly. "I didn't really think, though, that it would create such havoc in the chamber where you were, or blow down the gallery roof over my own head."

"A piece of flying granite knocked me out of time, and I haven't been fit for much since. In fact, when I heard you coming, I thought it was our Chinese friends come to finish the job. I suppose I was raving a bit, too, if I cried out as you say!"

CHAPTER X.

THE DAUGHTER OF DEATH.

SOMERS was made comfortable and left where he could keep watch over the outer entrance and thus give the alarm in case the place should be again visited. Then torches were prepared, and a search of the cavern and the various passages was commenced. This was largely at the instigation of Toltec, who was still half-convinced that he was not far from the mystery bound up in the strange characters handed down by the old priests.

"That tunnel bizness may 'a' been a blind," was his shrewd comment. "Them ole Toltecs

wa'n't to be sneezed at, I 'low, when it come to right down lyin'."

"And they may have lied about the treasure," retorted Jumbo. "But we'll take a look about. Something may turn up worth finding."

The passage in which Somers had been, only led a short distance, and the same was true of all the other galleries, save one. It connected with another cavern, larger than the first. This second cavern was so buried beneath the mountain, however, that no gleam of sunshine ever reached it. The floor was of fine, white sand, that yielded to the tread like costliest carpeting; and the roof and sides were of some firm-textured sandstone.

"Empty as blackness itself!" exclaimed Dillon, as he flared his torch into the gloom.

But no sooner were the words uttered than he started back with a cry.

The gigantic figure of a skeleton had started from out the darkness that was pierced by the light of the torch.

A chorus of exclamations broke from the three.

"It's rock!" whispered Jumbo, awed by the sight, but advancing. "It's a skeleton cut out of the solid rock. And there's another figure by the side of it."

Crowding closely together, the explorers stood in front of the grisly shape, and turned their expectant glances from this figure of Death to the equally strange figure which kept it company in the solitude, and then stared into the suggestive gloom behind as if expecting other phantoms to spring into being.

"Jes' knocks my time!" mumbled the old prospector, scarcely daring to lift his voice to an audible pitch. "I've see'd sights an' wonders in the course o' my airthly pilgimage, but I never expected to come onto any ha'n'ts like them!"

The words and the quaintness of the tones broke the spell that chained them.

"We'll take a look at these, first; and then we'll see what else there may be!"

Dillon held his torch so that the light fell full on the stone images. As has been said, one was cut into the semblance of a skeleton. It had been rudely hewn out of, and was supported by, the wall at its back, and bent forward and above the smaller image. One stony arm seemed outstretched and beckoning to the intruders, and the eyeless sockets were bent full upon them. The entire aspect of the uncanny thing was grotesquely and horribly suggestive.

"Looks like the old chap was inviting us to come nearer!" decided Jumbo, vainly striving to throw into his words their customary good-humored cheeriness.

And in this statement the sergeant aptly expressed the attitude which the unknown sculptor had given to the work of his hands.

The other figure was apparently that of a female, as there was an attempt at what seemed feminine drapery and ornament. She stood in a rigid, upright posture, with one hand thrust stiffly forward; and in this outthrust hand she clasped a heavy stone knife. Before her was a circular stone resembling a table, in the center of which was a small hole.

"I guess it's Grim Death and his Daughter!" Dillon suggested.

They were beginning to breathe freely again, and the irrepressible Jumbo declared that the smaller figure was that of Ajax defying the lightning.

"You remember him?" turning on his friend, "Down at the post, you know! The drunken Indian we saw there less than a moon ago! He had a whisky-bottle uplifted, just as this stone caricature has a knife. The pose is identical. And we dubbed the fellow, 'Ajax Defying the Lightning!'"

Dillon broke into a hearty laugh that made the echoes roll through the blackness as they probably had not rolled for scores of years, and the spirits of the little party were quite restored.

It seemed strange to stand in the presence of those mute witnesses of a race long since passed from the face of the earth, and to con and criticize the work of hands that were in all likelihood dust before the great Genoese explorer set his conquering feet on the shores of a New World. It emphasized the littleness of human life and the shortness of the span of existence, even when the scriptural three-score-and-ten is rounded out.

The old prospector did not long allow his mind to ruminate on such things. There was evermore in his thoughts the wonderful treasure written of by the priests of the old religion.

"I reckon, now, these fellers couldn't 'a' been put hyer fer to watch over that gol' an' diamonds! I've heern of unlikelier things!"

Jumbo had approached the flat stone in front of the female figure, and was examining it curiously.

"A queer-looking contraption!" he asserted, and forthwith began cautiously to mount it.

When he had gained the rim he drew himself up on his hands and feet. Instantly the stone table dipped with a sharp jerk, and like a descending thunderbolt the female figure fell forward, the hand clutching the heavy stone knife shooting straight for the prostrate sergeant.

It happened so quickly that the latter would have been slain then and there, but for the coolness and agility of Toltec Tom. With a movement as swift as that of the descending image he grasped the imperiled man and bodily dragged him from the table, just in time to escape the deadly stroke of the knife, which was thrust hilt deep into the hole in the table made to receive it! But for this it must have passed through the sergeant's body.

"A regular death-trap!" and Jumbo shivered, even while the sweat stood in beaded drops on his face. "Toltec, I owe you my life!"

"A narrer squeeze!" Toltec observed, warmly returning the hand-clasp, but paying no apparent heed to the words.

"I'm afraid that search for Toltec's gold mine is liable to lead one into difficulty."

Jumbo did not reply to Dillon's observation, but again approached and scrutinized the prostrate image.

"I ought to have seen that before!" squinting at the knife where it showed in the opening. "This is something connected with the old Toltec or Aztec religion. The stone was a sacrificial one. You know, they sacrificed human beings in their religious services! Well, right there is where the victim is placed—right in the position I occupied a minute ago. No doubt he was bound and lifted up there. Then his weight set the stone in motion, the image fell, and the knife was driven through his heart. And there! you can see the little channel made to drain away the flowing blood. It's all plain as noon-day, now."

The explanation was so clear and conclusively proved by the appearance of the table and the present positions of the fallen image and the knife, that no doubt could be entertained about the theory of the sergeant.

They were truly in a temple or place of sacrifice of one of the strange races that peopled the region so long ago.

Jumbo continued to scan the images and their surroundings, and as he did so the conviction was forced upon him that there was more than idle fancy in the belief held by the old prospector concerning the story of the mystic writings, and he determined to watch more closely than ever, if possible, for indications of the secreted treasure.

Prompted by this he suggested a further exploration of the cavern, the suggestion being at once coincided in. But, though they searched faithfully, spending a number of hours in the gloom of the caves and passages, nothing of great interest was come upon.

CHAPTER XI.

TOLTEC'S DISTRUST.

"FATHER, I should like to speak with you!" Toltec Tom looked up quickly and inquiringly, for there was something in his daughter's voice that struck strangely on his ear.

It was the evening of the day the abandoned showman had been found, and in which Jumbo had made such a narrow escape from the knife of the Daughter of Death. The party had returned to the house, bringing with them Somers, the graphophone, and the few rockets left. It had been a great day to all parties, for the wonderful talking-machine never grew stale in pleasure-giving qualities, and the incidents of the trip furnished a fund of interesting and amusing anecdote.

Margaret drew her father away from the house and beneath the screening branches of a pinone. The night was bright and calm, and the place free from the possibility of their conversation being overheard.

"Anything wrong, eh?" and Toltec looked down into the eyes of the girl, wondering that they should shine so brilliantly and that there should be such an unwonted dash of red in her face.

"No;—that is, nothing serious!" and she smiled. "Oh, you dear, old bear of a papa!" placing a warm palm on each shaggy cheek. "Of course you could never guess in the world what it is I want to say to you! Men are such dumb creatures!"

"Dumb, eh? Well, mebbe they be, and mebbe

they ben't. We'll see 'bout that, later. Some on 'em air cute 'nuff; and some too blame cute!"

She was not disposed to argue the point. "There was once a girl," taking a horny hand in both of her soft ones, "and this girl lived all alone in the Arizona hills; all alone, except her papa and her maid. And she was very happy. But by and by there came along a young man who won her heart and whispered nonsense into her ears;—and then—and then she was happier still, or would be if she was sure—"

She stopped short, for Toltec had grunted out some monosyllables which might have meant almost anything from disgust and disapproval to consent and congratulation.

"Now, you know what I wanted to speak to you about, papa," pleadingly, "and—and—" with a tearful quaver—"I hope you won't feel too badly about it, and that you will con—consent!"

"Which one o' the chaps is it?" Toltec asked, somewhat mournfully, but without any trace of anger in his tones. "Which one has been stealin' the love of my singin' bird?"

"I thought you had guessed that long ago! Why, it's Mr. Dillon. But he hasn't stolen the love of your singin' bird, papa! No matter how much I might care for Mr. Dillon, I could never love you less than I do. Never, papa! never!"

This assurance was very grateful to the old prospector, whose life was bound up in that of his daughter, and he stroked her hair gently as he paused for reply.

"I ought to have known something like this would happen;—that it was bound to happen in course of time. It's the way of nater, and I've lived long enough to know that ye can't run ag'in nater. Still, I wish't it hadn't come now an' jist in this way."

She clasped the hard hand a little tighter, but remained silent, waiting for him to proceed.

"It's jist this way," looking cautiously around to see that no one else was near. "The young chap's a fairish lookin' feller, an' may be straight as a string. Mind ye, I ain't sayin' 't he ain't! But they's some things I don't like the looks of. I ort to 'a' spoke to ye 'bout all this a good while ago. But, gosh! I'm an ole fool an' never thought of that!"

"I can't help havin' my s'picious ag'in' all of 'em. Mebbe these three air pardners an' have been playin' a game. Mebbe Jumbo wa'n't captured an' carried to that cave by the heathen Chinees an' tied up fer a knife-pitchin' exhibition! I never see'd it, ner you never see'd it!"

"But the evidence is too plain to admit of doubt!" she protested. "There were the knives and the wounded showman."

"Yes, I 'low the feller were hurt!"

"And the graphophone! It seems to me that it proves the truth of Mr. Somers's story."

"But s'posin' all that's true," he argued, "it don't jist clear up ever'thing to me, it don't. They may yet be pardners. They may be members of the band of Chinees smugglers that we've talked about."

"But the sergeant, father! He came from the fort, and it will be very easy to ascertain if his story is true."

"Yes, so fur as the officers may know 'bout him. But I've been thinkin' over a goodish many things connected with this Chinees bizness lately, an' I've found out there's some mysteries gathered 'round it that I can't jist see through. Now this sergeant may be a spy of the leader o' the Chinees smugglers, an' these others may be his pards. It's o'curred to me that suthin' wrong somewhere, fer I've heered things in my wanderin' lately that makes me 'most know that the Chinees leaders has a man or men at the post in their pay."

They had frequently discussed the movements of the mysterious parties seen in the hills; and, as he had told Jumbo, on more than one occasion he had followed these Chinese bands, but without becoming much the wiser thereby.

"There! there! I've hurt yer feelin's!" as she did not reply to his suspicious strictures. "Ever'thing I've said may be wrong. I'm shore I hope it is. But"—and his voice grew slightly harsh, "I shall keep my eyes open, come what comes!"

"I understand you, father," she replied unconsciously dropping the endearing term of "papa" which she had so witchingly used but a few moments before. "And, knowing just why you are so anxious I can't blame you. But oh! I did so want you to be pleased with—with this matter!"

"It'll be all right, I hope. I'll keep my eyes open, as I've promised. Recollect I haven't said anything like 'no,' yit."

And with these unsatisfying terms she was forced to be content.

CHAPTER XII.

PANIC-STRICKEN ASSAILANTS.

WHEN they returned to the house they found Jumbo and his friend, Dillon, amusing themselves with the graphophone, while Somers, much recovered and almost himself again, was drawing from Ina one of the many legends of her people. Not a shadow rested on the face of either father or daughter to show aught of the nature of the conversation they had just had; and Toltec, the mysterious old prospector, greeted the young men as warmly as if his breast had never harbored a suspicion against them.

Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed after they re-entered the building when Gringo poked his nose questioning into the air and gave an ominous growl.

"What is it, boy?" Toltec asked, looking toward the corner where his rifle stood.

For answer there came a shot which plowed through the heavy timbers of the door and buried itself in the wall near the treasure-seeker's head.

Quick as a flash he extinguished the light, but without moving from his position.

"They can't come that near ag'in wi'out somethin' to guide 'em in their aimin'. Now, you, Margaret an' Ina, git into the cyclone cellar, where lead can't reach ye, an' me an our frien's'll find out what this means."

The knowledge was obtained, however, before the women could obey, for a pattering of feet came swiftly upon the vanishing of the light, the squeaky, treble voices of Chinese were heard and a heavy log crashed against the door.

"It's an attack!" cried Jumbo, drawing his revolver, but waiting for orders from their host before venturing any movement. "How I wish I'd laid that thug out when I had him under my thumb! It would have saved trouble."

Dillon, having never before heard that there was a cyclone-cellar or place of refuge connected with the house, was paying more heed to the movements of the women, and was much pleased when he saw a door open in the floor, at a point where he had not known a door existed, and observed them vanish into the depths below.

There were some loop-holes along the sides and ends of the house, and from these Toltec and his companions fired a few shots, which, whether they did any damage or not, caused the assailants to temporarily withdraw.

"They've gathered into a crowd out there on the hillside," advised Dillon, screwing an eye against one of the small apertures. "We could sling a shower of lead into them, now, and make them scatter like scared sheep."

While he was speaking, one of the attacking party disengaged himself from his fellows and advanced, waving a white rag above his head. It was Paou; and he came close up to the house. Then, instead of speaking, he swung one hand quickly around his head, and the next instant a stone crashed through the small window which looked out on that side.

"Some'at reckless o' winder-glass, that feller is," growled Toltec, picking up the stone which had fallen near his feet. "Cost like thunder to git it hyer, and I don't like to have it smashed that way by no yaller heathen, I don't!"

Paou had remained motionless, after sending the stone, and waved the white rag above his head as if confident of its protecting powers.

"I'd be willing to bet a month's pay that the scoundrels out there wouldn't respect such a flag t'oo minutes!" blurted the sergeant. "But of course we can't play sneak just because they would. I'd like most awfully to take a shot at the scamp, though!"

"Sore over the fact that you let him go when you had the cinch on him, eh?" queried Dillon, good-humoredly. "I don't blame you. I haven't quite forgot how he twisted my neck. All things come, however, to those who wait. We'll get the thug by and by, or I miss my guess."

Toltec and Somers were stooping over the stone, and an exclamation from them now drew the attention of the others.

"There's a bit of writin' on it!" averred the prospector, cutting the string and removing the paper. "Some o' you that's good at sich take it an' see if you can read it."

Dillon reached for the writing, and read aloud, bending near the candle which Toltec lighted for the purpose:

"TO THE MAN KNOWN AS THE TREASURE-SEEKER:—"

"You have with you three men, who are neither your friends nor ours, and we ask you to deliver them up peaceably. They are renegades from our band, though we presume they are now representing themselves as something far different. We know you to be a good man and true, and have no quarrel with you whatever. As an evidence of this

we ask you to remember how we have allowed you to remain in this vicinity and seek for gold to your heart's content, without so much as disturbing you or even asking of you your business here. But these three men whom you are now sheltering we must and will have; if not by a voluntary surrender by you or of their own accord, then by the power of force and numbers. You must be aware that I can muster enough men to tear your house down over your head and drag these men out, whether you will or no. But in doing so some one will be hurt, doubtless killed; and I do not wish to sacrifice any of my men, nor do you wish to risk the life of yourself or daughter. I make no war on women, but in case of an attack on the building of course I cannot assure you that your daughter's life will be spared. Surrender these men, and all will be avoided. Will you do it? Otherwise I shall at once take measures to get possession of the traitors. Tie your answer to this stone and heave it out; and think twice before you decide, that your decision may not be hasty nor influenced by the men with you, but be your own expression of what you wish.

CAPT. BASIL FLINT."

"Renegades! Hear that, ye winged wings! Was ever such gall witnessed?" howled Jumbo, swelling with indignation. "I'll twist that captain's neck, sure, if ever I get my fingers on it. Runaways from his band of cut-throats!"

Dillon had given the prospector a look of keen questioning when the opening sentences had been read. Surely, he declared to himself, Toltec would never believe such slanderous accusations against them. He wondered, however, if it would not be the part of wisdom for the three to leave the shelter of Toltec's abode and fight for their lives and liberty with the horde of wretches assembled on the slope. In that event all danger to Margaret would be averted, and he was willing to risk his life a dozen times over rather than bring a shadow of peril to the woman he worshiped, and whom he hoped some day to make his wife.

"What's to be done about it?" queried Somers, a shade of anxiety on his face.

"Send the scamp back with a good-sized bee in his ears, and if he don't walk fast enough hurry him a little with a shot from a Winchester!" was the sergeant's indignant suggestion. "Such insolence deserves punishment; and in a case of this kind, where we're dealing with thieves and liars, I'm not at all sure that a white rag has any call to be respected."

"But think of the women!" urged Dillon. "A fight here may bring them into danger; may cost their lives. I'm not sure but we ought to go out and take our chances like men, and not bring trouble on our good friends here."

"That question is one which ought to be left to Toltec," suggested the showman. "We are his guests; or at any rate I count myself one. And if my presence is to bring trouble to him and his, I'm for cutting out just as quick as I can. I can't say that I specially like the looks of the crowd out there, but I'm willing to take my chances."

The words were so generous, and the sentiments they expressed so correct and just that the others hastened to place themselves alongside.

"Of course! That's right; and I'm a fool for thinking of anything else!" asserted the warm-hearted Jumbo. "Here! you fellow—" lifting his voice so that his words could easily reach the waiting Paou.

"No you don't!" growled the prospector, who had listened rather impatiently and bewilderedly to the running fire of suggestion and comment. "I couldn't never look a white man in the face again if I'd let you go out there. 'Twould be as good as tossing ye into the mouths of a pack o' mountain wolves. No! nothin' o' that kind fer ole Toltec Tom!"

"Hyar, you taller-faced son of a sea-cook! Listen to me a minute. You can understand plain American well 'nough to kerry the message without it bein' writ! Tell yer cowardly cut-throat boss that if he wants these runnygates of his'n, he'll jist haf' to come an' take 'em, fer I would't drive a yaller dog out like he wants me to do them! Do you ketch the bang o' that? If ye do, cut sticks purty tol'able soople, or ye'll wish ye had!"

There was such bitter emphasis, not to say menace in the words, that Paou, who comprehended full well the character of the threat, and the firmness of the man making it, drew back into the shadows with a haste that bordered on the ludicrous.

He had scarcely disappeared when a shower of bullets were rained on the house. Only those striking the planking of the door cut their way through, and as the inmates of the building were careful to keep well out of range of these, no injury was done.

A volley of shots was fired in return; and a

sharp cry of pain proved that one at least had not been without a billet.

After this all was still for a number of minutes.

"I guess they're up to some new game," whispered Somers, who had been assigned to watch the west end. "Come over here and see what you make of this."

There was but one loop-hole in this end, and it was consequently the most difficult portion of the walls to protect, a fact which seemed to have become known to the leader of the Chinese.

Toltec hastened to that end, and applied an eye to the hole.

"I've been some'at afeared o' that!" he declared, moving away, so that Jumbo, who had followed him, might take a survey.

What the latter saw was a huge, wall-like structure, that was being slowly moved forward. It was, in fact, a hastily-improvised, but strong, movable breastworks, behind which a large body of Chinese were doubtless safely ensconced, and by the aid of which they were advancing to the attack on the house fully screened from any shots from the loop-hole.

"Jist to see what they've reely got there—" and the prospector shoved the muzzle of his heavy rifle through the opening, and with a quick aim fired.

The shot was answered by a yell of insolent defiance.

"The thing's made of logs and they've mounted it on wheels that they must 'a' brought wif 'em. Can't no rifle hyer faze it, if mine don't. I 'low when they git clost enough they'll try what fire will do."

"Do you mean they'll likely fire the building?" asked Dillon, whitening to the lips.

"I calc'late that's ther' plan!" and although the prospector must have been as anxious for the safety of Margaret as Dillon could possibly have been, there was not a quaver in his tones as he made reply.

"If there was just a window or a hole of some kind in this end!" grumbled the showman.

"So they is," asserted Toltec, laying hand on one of the logs and pushing it easily in its bed. "It can be shoved out o' place from this side, but it'd take a purty good jolt to fetch it from t'other."

Somers did not explain his meaning, but with a sigh of relief hastened away. He was back in an instant, and with him he had the graphophone and the rockets. The others comprehended his purpose and stood back out of the way as he placed one of the rockets in position, struck a match and made ready to move the log.

In another moment the log had been shoved aside, and the spiteful rocket, like a demon of fire, leaped into the darkness without, and sped away over the heads of the mob behind the movable breastwork.

It was followed instantly by another; and the startled exclamations borne to the besieged showed that this novel means of repelling an attack was not without advantages.

But the showman had not exhausted his materials. Striking a torch, he held it near the opening, and then hoisting up the graphophone where it could be seen by those whom he wished to terrorize, he caused it to hurl into the gloom the Spanish sentences that had been heard by them on a previous occasion.

Following this came the threat, uttered in his clear, ringing voice:

"Leave! Leave at once! Or the thunders will descend again to wreck and slay!"

The threat was answered with a howl of fear; and from behind the log structure the Chinese tumbled, panic-stricken and fleeing as if for their lives.

In vain Paou and Captain Basil raved and commanded. Their words were as powerless as the winds to stay the flood of fear.

"It's a trick!" shrieked Flint, beside himself with rage. "You, Paou, make your men charge! Shoot 'em down if they don't."

A few of the Chinese, of sterner stuff than their fellows, remained faithful to the lieutenant; and with these, Paou, obedient to his instructions, tried to stem the tide and rally for an assault.

Springing across the logs, with a courage that was admirable, he led those in charge. They were met by a volley from within that stretched half the number on the sward. Then the others broke into flight, and all Flint's ravings were not sufficient to induce them to make another effort.

"Now, while they're scared to death, give it to 'em!" cried Jumbo, his warlike ardor flaming forth. "Chase 'em like rabbits. Rustle 'em! Rout 'em!"

His companions were nothing loth to obey, and with shouts and yells and the quick rattle of firearms, to which were added the hissing rush of rockets discharged by the showman, they tumbled from the building and dashed toward the demoralized Celestials. This was all that was needed to complete the stampede. The wretches, tossing away their weapons, streamed in wild disorder toward the sheltering hills.

But some were left behind, the slain and those too sorely wounded to make their escape. Among the last was Paou. His hurts were not of a serious character, but he was insensible, a ball from a Winchester having cut away the skin along the base of the brain.

"Tie him up and fetch him into the house!" commanded the sergeant, who seemed to have taken control during the sortie. "We'll have use for him, likely. And, besides, we don't want to be fools enough to let him get away this time."

And so this slippery representative of the Flowery Kingdom trussed up like a fowl ready for basting, and tossed unceremoniously into the house, where, when he came to himself a short time thereafter, he doubtless found much to think of concerning his pet theories of destiny and fate.

CHAPTER XIII. HELD AS HOSTAGES.

THE wrath of Captain Flint was something terrible, when, after his return to the cave beneath the island, he proceeded to take stock of the results of his campaign, and to plan an evening of the score. His maledictions fell like rani on the heads of the recreant Chinese. Nor did his white associates escape. A desert lion roused to frenzy, and shaking his jungle home with the fury of his roars! This was Flint, the King of the Loco League, as he marched back and forth, hurling his anathemas on friends and foes alike.

The whites muttered strangely among themselves, not liking his words, nor the manner in which they were uttered. But the Chinese only crouched before him like slavish and beaten curs. They were of the servile, coolie class, and if he had clubbed or bastinadoed each in turn, they would never have voiced a protest. They were used to harsh words and harsher treatment, and accepted his abuse dumbly and meekly.

He was interrupted in his storm of curses by the appearance of a man, who came forward, pulling a grizzled forelock and bowing with much obsequiousness.

Flint turned on him menacingly.

"Well, why don't you report?" roaring the question, and clutching at his throat as if utterance choked him. "What has happened? Speak, you idiot! and don't stand there bowing and scraping as if you'd taken leave of what little sense you ever had!"

"If you please, sir!" drawing back a pace to be out of harm's way, in case his irascible chief should utterly lose all control of himself. "If you please, sir, they've taken Paou to the fort."

The loss of his Chinese lieutenant had been to Flint the most bitter thing connected with his recent defeat. He could ill afford to dispense with the services of the astute thug. No other man in the band, not even the redoubtable captain himself, was so fertile of resources and expedients as was the dark-faced Celestial who had fallen into the hands of the men at the cabin. Hence this untoward circumstance had annoyed and grieved Flint sorely; and he had left a spy behind, when the retreat could no longer be avoided, and had given instructions to this spy to report at once anything occurring which might prove of interest or importance.

And now the fellow had appeared, and his report was as distressing as had been the late defeat.

"You lie, you villain!" Flint howled, fearing to credit the truth of the statement. "Tell me it's a lie, or—I'll choke your black heart out. You're making it up for some purpose! Is it not so?"

But in spite of the captain's ravings the man stuck to his story, and reiterated the fact that Paou had been conveyed, or rather was then being conveyed, to Fort Mesquite.

"He's in charge of the big chap they call Jumbo. Paou was bound to the boss of the other feller, Dillon, and so wropped an' tied up that he'll never be able to wiggle away, slick as he is at them kind of tricks. I reelly have my doubts if he kin so much as git a good, healthy move onto his eyebrows."

"How long ago was this?" Flint inquired, stopping his cursings and endeavoring to take a calmer survey of the matter.

"'Bout an hour, I sh'd jedge. I know I cut sticks jes' as soon's I could do so 'thout bein' dis-kivered."

The captain made no further inquiries, but ordered out a body of men, hoping that it might not yet be too late to rescue the thug from the hands of his foes. This body he led in person, under the guidance of the individual who had brought in the report. But Jumbo had taken measures to evade such danger, and had hurried on at so rapid a pace that Flint found it impossible to come up with the two.

This failure only added to the fire of hate that was consuming him; and he began, on his return, to map out some method of reaping summary vengeance, if he could do no more.

Then, too, he was afraid that Paou, notwithstanding his loyalty, might under pressure of fear or punishment reveal the secret of the island, and thus lead the entire band into the toils of the officers of the post.

Meanwhile Jumbo pursued his way with all celerity, placed his prisoner in safe keeping, and hastened back to his friends in the mountain valley.

He found affairs much as when he left. There had been no further demonstration on the part of the Chinese.

"They've had enough to make 'em sick for a time, I take it!" was his pleased comment. "And, now, if you'll hearken to yours truly, I've some plans to lay before the committee of the whole."

The others had been doing some thinking, also; and the result of the conference then held was that search ought to be again commenced for the hiding-place of the outlaws.

Toltec Tom, the man who was more interested in the locating of the mythical treasure of the priests, took no part in this conference. He had given these men shelter, and in times of peril had aided them to the best of his ability, and now seemed to wish to follow out his own course, from which he had been so far led since their coming. From appearances, and to judge by his manner, his thoughts ran in this channel, though he gave no expression, contenting himself by remaining aloof from the others when the pursuit of the Chinese was under discussion.

Thus it came about that on the second night after Jumbo's return, the post sergeant, Dillon, and Somers left the home of the prospector under cover of the thick darkness and stole away in the direction of the river. They rightly surmised that the building was under constant surveillance at the hands of some of Flint's minions, and did not wish their movements to become known to him.

But they were known, nevertheless. Captain Basil had found among the coolies a man who was almost worthy to stand in the shoes of the unapproachable Paou, himself. And this man was lying in wait in the grass not a dozen steps from the door when the trio crept so softly out into the night.

With snaky movements, keeping well under cover, he followed them, so near at times that had he been as well up in English as Paou he could have understood their whispered talk. Fortunately it was for their plans that the English language was to him a sealed book.

"If we can just blunder onto the place where they hole up!" exclaimed the sergeant. "The rest of the performance will be easy!"

And he proceeded to run hastily over the plans he had outlined, and on which he had expatiated at length a half-score of times.

"Old Yates is as anxious as he can be to lay these fellows by the heels, for it's not to his credit, you know, that they should carry on their villainy this way right beneath his nose and he be able to do nothing to stop it. And so he readily enough acceded to my demands. If we can just find out where the scamps have their headquarters, then, as I said, he stands ready to send a body of troopers to mop up the earth with them."

"There are two men now waiting for signals from me. One of them is on the top of Table Mountain, in good sight of this region, and the other is located on Tower Hill, nearer the post. A beacon light from any eminence hereaway will light similar fires on those hills and bring the soldiers to our assistance."

He stopped, for a suspicious sound reached him. It was the dislodgement of a piece of earth by the foot of the Chinese. The latter had followed far enough to enable him to locate their line of route and was now slipping away to make report of his discoveries to Flint.

"Some animal moving in the chaparral!" after hearkening a moment; and then the three moved on, all unaware that a spy of the men they were seeking had been so near them.

But, if they did not know of the proximity of the spy, the result of his late presence was made manifest to them when they reached the vicinity of the river, which they did just as day was beginning to faintly illumine the east.

Here, before they were aware of peril, they were surrounded by an overwhelming horde of Chinese under the command of the angry captain himself. They attempted a resistance, discharging their weapons and then using them as clubs. But it was futile. A number of their assailants were wounded, but the three were borne down by the impetuous rush of numbers, and before their brains had fairly ceased spinning from surprise they were lying bound and helpless on the sands by the river-side.

"Thought you would come to hunt us, eh?" snarled Flint, showing his teeth wolfishly.

"Two can play at that game."

"Now that you have us I presume you'll make short work of us?" and the imperturbable Jumbo essayed to smile.

"All in due time, my good friend!" turning from shouting a command at his lieutenant. "Don't hurry me, though, or you'll live to regret it!"

"Ah! thanks. We're to live, then! I was just thinking of making my will."

"Don't anger him needlessly," cautioned Dillon; at which sound advice Jumbo checked the words that so strongly welled for utterance.

When the river had been crossed, Captain Basil, without more ado, had his prisoners tossed upon hastily-improvised litters. All but Jumbo. Him he stood up before him as if to command or sentence.

"Now, hark ye, you dog! You're the chap that carried my Chinese friend, Paou, to the post over yonder. For doing that I ought to kill you; and I may when the right time comes! But just now I have other uses for you. You see these pards of yours, all tied up till they can't budge! If you care anything for their lives you'll pay heed to what I say.

"I'm going to let you go, now. I want you to make tracks for Fort Mesquite. When you get there tell the commandant that I have these men here, in a place where he can't find them if he hunts till doomsday, and that I'll release them only on one condition. If within the week Paou is safe and sound and with me I'll let these men go. All the commandant need do is to turn Paou loose; he'll come to me of his own accord, and I'll risk any of your trailers following him."

"But what guarantee are we to have that you'll do as you say?" the sergeant questioned, suspiciously, apparently forgetting or not caring that a bit of quibbling might prejudice the liberty just offered him.

"Just this. I can't afford to play false, for the good reason that I may want to take advantage of or make an offer of an exchange again. If I play false, now, it will block the doors to everything of the sort in the future. I don't ask you to take my word for anything. You wouldn't, if I asked. All you have to do is to consider me not quite so big a fool as not to know what is best for myself. Will you go?"

Jumbo needed no urging. He realized that, as matters stood, he and his companions stood small chance of escape; and so, in the gray of the early morning, and without a backward look, he allowed himself to be again rowed across the river—and then struck into the hills in the direction of Fort Mesquite.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SIGNAL FIRES.

AS soon as he was hidden by the growth of chaparral, and by the eminences, from view of the Chinese, Jumbo Griggs changed his course and headed for the prospector's home.

He reached it in due time, but was disappointed to find the old man absent. He hesitated to tell Margaret of the occurrences of the morning, knowing how great her distress would be; and after some evasive replies again went his way, but not until he had secured a supply of eatables and refilled his water bottle.

Then he crossed to the other side of the valley, where Philip Dillon's horse was cropping the rich grass, secured the animal and mounted and rode off.

But fate was against the jolly sergeant that day. He had barely put five miles between himself and the home of Toltec when the animal shied at a long-legged jack rabbit which leaped like a flash from a bunch of sage-brush, and he found himself on the ground, badly bruised and injured by coming into contact with a rock.

"Curse the luck!" he growled, trying to rise. But he found, when on his feet, that he could not walk a dozen steps. His ankle was sprained

and the weight of his body on it gave him most excruciating pain.

"A pretty outlook, this!" suppressing a groan and supporting himself by clinging to a gnarled cedar. "If there's a bigger fool in the world than a scary horse I suppose it's a rabbit, and when two fools come together trouble's bound to follow."

The horse had galloped away a few hundred yards and stopped, and was now feeding. Jumbo whistled and called to it, but in vain. It had evidently made up its mind to go no further on the route to the post.

Then, the sergeant got down on his hands and knees and tried to crawl near enough to it to grasp the bridle-rein, which hung loosely and sometimes became tangled about its forefeet. Hour after hour did he spend thus, the beast leading him a most exhausting and exasperating chase, and taking him further and further from the direction he wished to pursue.

Finally, as if tired of being thus followed, the horse gave a taunting toss to its head, and galloped over a ridge and out of sight.

To continue the effort to capture it was now out of the question; and the luckless sergeant was almost in despair. The lives of his friends seemed to hang on the chance of his reaching the post, and to do this appeared now to be an utter impossibility.

With a groan he sunk upon the sand, and tried to take a calm survey of the situation. If he did not succeed in his mission, if Paou was not released and allowed to return to the band within a reasonable time, then Dillon and Somers must pay the penalty with their lives. For there could be no sort of doubt that the bloodthirsty captain would go to extreme measures in a case of this kind.

Jumbo was not of a despairing temperament, however, and for a long time he lay there in the glare of the hot sun, racking his weary brain for some means whereby he might carry out the mission that had been imposed on him.

Only one way suggested. That was to light the beacon-fires, and call the soldiers to his aid. But, taking everything into consideration, this seemed worse than folly—in fact, suicidal. The outlaw leader could not know why this was done, and would very naturally suppose that the commandant had refused to comply with his request for an exchange, and proposed to attempt his subjection by force. And the chances would then be very good for a short shrift for the men in Flint's power.

"I've got to get there, some way!" the indomitable sergeant exclaimed, expressing his thoughts aloud. "I've just got to!"

Drawing out his knife, he dragged himself to the nearest asp-tree, and from it cut some branches. With much difficulty and infinite trouble he fashioned these into crutches. He found that he could support himself by their aid in a painful manner, and could even hobble along at something a little better than a snail's pace. But, unless his strength increased, or the pain subsided, so that he could use greater exertion, it would take a good week to reach the post.

Nevertheless he toiled on, stopping now and then to rest, or to rub his swollen and throbbing ankle, which from the treatment it was receiving had turned almost purple in hue.

An hour dragged by in this manner, then another; at the end of which time the sergeant was reeling from faintness and fatigue. But he kept on in spite of all, until giddiness overpowered him, and he sunk unconscious in his tracks.

With a groan he came to himself, to find the shadows of night closing about him. His muscles were sore from the exhausting strain, and his hurt ankle throbbed with knife-like stabs.

"Oh, that miserable beast of a horse!" and something like a sob shook the herculean frame. It was plain now he could never reach the post in time to be of assistance to his friends.

He took a long pull at the water-bottle, then poured some of the precious fluid on the bandages about his ankle. The last brought a soothing sense of relief; but water was of too great value in this dire extremity to be used even in this way. There were no springs within miles, and the few drops yet remaining to him must suffice to keep life within his body until help could come.

"I'll have to do it," he said, "whatever the result may be. It's all I can do!"

He drew himself to a sitting posture and looked about, while he ate of the provender he had brought. He was almost famished, the pain and exertion seeming to have given him an appetite as well as increased his thirst.

"Yes; there's no other way!"

In the thickening darkness he surveyed the hills that lay about, and selected one for his purpose. Then, having gained some strength from the rest, and the food and drink, he got upon his crutches and stumped painfully toward the eminence he had singled out.

It required quite an hour's toil to gain its summit, and by this time the gloom was impenetrable. Nevertheless, he succeeded in gathering a quantity of dry boughs and heaping them into a pile. He then took a match from his pocket-case, ignited it and applied it to the pine needles and inflammable material he had placed beneath the pile.

A tongue of flame shot athwart the stygian darkness, caught at the resinous wood, and curled upward in a burst of fiery glory.

Jumbo watched it with eager eyes and panting breath, praying the while, as most sober-minded men do in times of need—if at no other—praying that it might accomplish the thing which he so greatly desired, and so bring life and help to his imperiled friends instead of the death which now menaced them. And as he thus lifted his thoughts to the great Ruler of the Universe, a calmness of soul and confidence came to him which was strangely out of keeping with his circumstances and surroundings.

Like a great fiery eye the flame he had kindled glowed through the night, and when it had burned thus for a few minutes an answering flame leaped into view on a far-away mountain peak!

"Thank God!" was the faithful sergeant's exclamation. "Help will come!"

And, assured in his own consciousness that he had acted for the best, he sunk down near the dancing firelight and strove to form plans for outwitting the outlaw captain when the troopers should arrive.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

WHILE these hurrying events were taking place Toltec Tom was by no means idle. As has been stated, he was absent from home when Jumbo Griggs visited the house; and absent for a very good reason, as will presently appear. The night previous he had struck the trail of fresh Chinese arrivals—an event which led to a series of remarkable adventures.

The Chinese had been transported by means of the clumsy boat to the American shore, and were being arranged in order for the march by a man deputed by the captain for the purpose, when Toltec became aware of their proximity.

"Aha! more yaller devils lookin' fer the treasure of the old priests!" he growled, and forthwith placed himself in position to observe their movements.

The night, like the one that followed, was very dark, a circumstance much in the old man's favor.

"The chance o' a lifetime!" he whispered, worming his way to a point where he could hear all that might be said.

He was soon repaid for his trouble.

"Now, keep clost together, all you!" he heard the guide order. "An' no talkin' an' jabberin'; an' I'll take ye right to the captain hisself."

A daring thought came to the treasure-seeker at this moment. He knew that but few of the Chinese could understand a word of English; and as few, in all probability, had ever before seen their guide and his white associates. Could he not, therefore, insinuate himself among them and accompany them to the secret hiding-place of the band?

It was worth the effort and the risk.

Thus impelled, he crept closer and yet closer, and when the command was given for a forward movement he was in the very midst of the huddling Celestials.

Having gained this much the rest was easy enough. He had only to maintain an attitude of complete silence, and so long as the darkness held out all would go well.

The march, which was in its course devious and meandering, lasted upward of an hour; and then a halt was made, while some kind of a conversation was conducted by the guides forward. Then the advance was recommenced.

Toltec's heart gave a great bound as he became aware that a tunnel of some sort was being entered. What if it should prove the long-sought avenue to the treasure-chamber? Bushes were pushed aside, a door was reached, and passwords and countersigns were exchanged. After which the door creaked heavily, and the close air, as the column moved on, showed that they were in an inclosure between walls.

Ten minutes later a second door was reached

in the same way; then a third, and a fourth had closed behind them they found themselves in a large cave.

A low fire of wood was burning in the center of this apartment. Toltec Tom, although he did not yet know it, was in reality within the home of the outlaws, and never had he been in a place so filled with peril to himself.

As the column filed slowly into the cavern, Captain Basil Flint arose from a bed of skins, and came forward with some commands.

In spite of the knowledge that discovery might mean death, Toltec could not resist the desire to look about and speculate as to chances of this being the treasure-chamber of the priests. Surely it could not be, he assured himself. And, if such it was, then all chance of his ever coming into possession of the treasure was gone.

Such riches, if in that place, occupied as it was and had been for so long, must have been unearthed and dissipated.

He ground his teeth in a rage as he thought of this. That the captain of so odious a band of renegades should come into so great wealth as he conceived this treasure to be, was a thought unbearable.

"I'll not believe it till I jist haf' to!" he growled. "This ain't the place! It jist can't be!"

He recalled his present position and the danger he was in, and sunk into the shadows near the wall back of him, where the chance of discovery was least.

He could see better, too, without imperiling his neck.

The Chinese were being shown their quarters, where they were to be lodged until a favorable opportunity came for sending them into the mining districts further north. The guides had joined their cronies and were talking over the events of the night. The treasure-seeker had not sought the shadows any too soon!

Slowly he allowed his eyes to wander over the walls of the cavern, faintly illumined by the low fire, taking in the details of every projecting point and dark depression. There were some passages leading he knew not whither. How he longed to explore them and wring from them their secrets!

Oh! for one hour in that place with none to molest or make afraid!

This was his mental cry.

So absorbed did he become in this study of the walls and the physical peculiarities of the place that he almost forgot where he was and what character of men surrounded him. But he was recalled to all this in a manner far from pleasant.

The Chinese, who had taken Paou's position, fearing that some of his newly-arrived countrymen might have failed to find their way to the place intended for them, made a tour of the cave for the purpose of investigating. He was as like Paou in his movements as possible, being built on the fur-footed, cat-like order; and in consequence stepped so lightly that he was on Toltec Tom before the old man was aware of it.

It was useless to try to escape his observation. This Toltec saw at the first glance. So, to counteract the effect of the discovery, he sprang at the surprised Celestial, clutching him by the throat in a grip of steel.

The Chinese tried to cry out, but could not. He did, however, by the violence of his struggles, attract the attention of some of the outlaws, and these came running to his assistance, filling the air with questioning exclamations as they ran.

The treasure-seeker knew now that the fight was one of life and death, with the chances largely against him. And, besides, should he succeed in breaking from the renegades, where could he fly to? What place in all that underground den of vice could offer him even a moment's refuge?

As these queries flashed across his mind, he caught the gleam of water at the point where the river chafed against the bank. It was the only other way out of the cavern, but a way that by every member of the band was considered but the gateway to a watery grave for whoever should attempt to leave the chamber by it.

Dragging the Chinese with him, he dashed toward the seething and yeasty flood. As he neared the stream, a second Celestial interposed, flourishing a keen-bladed knife for a throw.

The cavern was now a scene of the wildest confusion. The occupants poured from every gallery and chamber, some half-dressed, and came hurrying, screaming and calling toward the point where the struggle was taking place.

"Keep still, you fools!" roared Flint, springing into their midst. "Do you want to bring the soldiers down on us from Fort Mesquite?"

You're making more racket than a pack of yelping coyotes."

At his words the tumult somewhat subsided, though enough noise was still being made to have revealed the location of the retreat to any ears on the island or the adjacent shores.

A dozen men crowded around the commander, waiting for his instructions, though their attitudes and the manner in which they swung their revolvers, showed that they much preferred to rush headlong on the intruder without stopping for orders.

This confusion was favorable to the old man. Every moment he was dragging Paou's successor toward the water's edge. The Celestial with the knife saw this, and believed that without prompt action Toltec would yet make his escape, or at least succeed in drowning himself and the man he was holding.

Like a flash light, therefore, the keen knife cleft the air. It was aimed straight for Toltec's bosom. But the old man was wonderfully quick for one of his appearance, and when he saw the deadly blade leave the hand of the thrower, he drew himself erect and thrust the body of his prisoner between himself and harm.

With a sickening thud the knife was buried to the hilt in the breast of the unfortunate Chinese, causing almost instant death. And Toltec, feeling the form grow limp beneath his hold, dropped the body, and with a defiant shout plunged boldly into the stream, not knowing whether it would lead him to death or be the means of his salvation.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TOLTEC TREASURE.

THE strong current bore the treasure-seeker rapidly from the opening. Fortunately he was a powerful swimmer, and as soon as his head came to the surface, he struck out boldly. All was silence and gloom. Not a light shone anywhere, and no sound was heard save the swish and rush of the waters. But for the strange position in which he found himself, he would have been strongly tempted to believe the whole thing merely a dream.

Getting his bearings, he headed in the direction of the shore on which he wished to land; and having reached *terra firma* in safety, he scrambled into the shelter of some bushes and sat down to dry his clothing and await developments.

In the course of a few minutes he heard voices on the island; then a boat put into the water and was pushed off. The strokes of the oars came to him plainly, and fearing discovery if he remained where he was, he crawled away up the slope, and soon left the river far to the rear.

Nevertheless it was morning before he returned home, he having by that time removed all traces of his late wetting, that his daughter might have no inkling of the peril he had been in.

His guests, who had departed in the night, before he himself had left the house, were still absent. Margaret mentioned the fact that Jumbo had been there but a short time previous to her father's coming, but that he had gone away again without having left any message.

This was not strange, as the sergeant came and went generally without giving any whys or wherefores. So Toltec placidly ate his breakfast, and then smoked his usual morning pipe, making no mention of the stirring events in which he had just played a part, thinking it the part of wisdom not to give his daughter cause for uneasiness.

But he never for a moment forgot to scan the hills that lay about the building and to take note of every movement in the sage brush and chaparral, not knowing but at that instant his enemies might be advancing upon him.

Placid as the old man seemed, his mind was really in a state of great ferment. The wonders of the treasure-house of the priests strongly stirred his imagination. He had dreamed of it and thought of it night and day. Had he at last found it? Was this abode of outlaws the place meant in the old Toltec writings? There was the tunnel leading to a cavern! And if this was the place, then what had become of the gems and precious metal?

When he had smoked out his pipe, he drew writing materials before him and scrawled a hasty letter. It contained an account of his adventures and discoveries, couched in the briefest terms, and also gave a description of the cavern and directions as to how and where the tunnel entrance was to be found. A request that if he did not return within twelve hours search should be made for him, closed the communication. This he addressed to Jumbo, but

told Margaret to give it to whichever of their friends should first come back.

To her he said nothing of the contents of the letter, nor of his intentions, merely saying he was going out into the hills for a time, and that if he remained a little longer than usual she was not to worry on that account.

Then he kissed her and turned away from the building.

All day he lay out on the hills with the river and the island in plain view, but himself screened from sight of any one. But not a thing did he see to reward his patient watching. The river and the island were apparently deserted.

When night came, he made his way again to the mouth of the tunnel, determined to investigate more fully the secrets of the island, if the effort should cost him his life. He expected to find the mouth of the tunnel guarded, and was not mistaken.

Crouching low in the grass he waited, reasoning that a sentry would not be posted in front of the hidden door if parties were not expected to be coming and going. He had not long to wait.

A man suddenly arose in the gloom close by his side, advanced and uttered the single word, "Paou." The sentry touched a concealed spring; the door—which seemed but a part of a solid wall of stone—moved on its hinges, and the new-comer vanished.

Five minutes later Toltec Tom arose in the same manner out of the bushes, whispered the magical word, and was permitted to pass without question. The door closed softly behind him and he realized that now he must go forward whether he would or not.

Feeling his way with great caution, lest a false step might betray him or precipitate him into unknown dangers, the old man advanced along the foul-smelling passage. When he had gone over the route with the band of Chinese he had carefully counted the steps; now he recounted them, to be able to tell when he was near the second door.

He had not reached it, however, when footsteps in the tunnel behind warned him that others were coming. At this he crowded against the wall, scarcely daring to breathe for fear his presence should become known. But, to his great distress, he found he could not press so closely against the wall but that one of two parties walking abreast must touch him. Of those advancing there were a number; and discovery was, therefore, inevitable.

There seemed to be no sentry before this door, and as the on-comers were yet some distance away, he began hastily to run his hands over the walls in the hope that he might touch the spring controlling the movement of the door.

He pressed this way and that, becoming almost frantic in his eagerness. The crowd of talking men were now very near, and he was seriously thinking of drawing his weapons for a fight. When—oh, the joy of it! the stone yielded beneath his heavy pushing, and a section of the wall swung inward. Hastily he squeezed through the narrow aperture. Then the door swung back of its own accord, and for the time being he was safe.

But his amazement was great when the men passed by his place of hiding, as he could tell by the sounds of their voices, and continued on without coming into the chamber or tunnel in which he found himself!

"There mus' be two doors! But, where does t'other lead to? I reckon I'm in the right one—the one that goes to the main cave!"

He felt about, to discover that the walls widened away, very differently indeed from the cramped character of the walls of the tunnel. He got up and advanced slowly, feeling out the path for his feet. He was in a large roomy place—certainly not in the tunnel, whose characteristics he well remembered.

Bewildered beyond measure, he ventured to strike a match that he might look about and determine where he was. It showed a cavern, with a low ceiling, and walls dust-covered and festooned with cobwebs. It was plain that the foot of man had not pressed its sandy floor for a long time, for there was not anywhere the imprint of a step.

The treasure-seeker had indeed stumbled upon a portion of the cavern beneath the island, of which even the outlaws had no knowledge. The rock door leading to it had never been found by them, and the chances were just about one in a thousand that it never would be.

Toltec tried to cause the door to move again on its hinges by pressing against the projections on that side. He failed; and though he went over the wall inch by inch he could not find the cunningly-hidden spring, if such a spring there was.

"My God!" and the sweat came out in great beads on his forehead. "I'm shut in here! Buried alive!"

He had burned out a dozen matches and now began to realize that he ought to husband his store. Bits of pine branches, so dry they were almost ready to drop to pieces, lay upon the floor, and of these he fashioned two torches. One he lighted, and carrying the other with him, set out to discover the nature of the place he had so strangely stumbled on.

After walking straight forward for five minutes he caught the sounds of voices. They were not in the chamber with him, but came from some point without or beyond. A little investigation showed that they came in reality through the wall in front of him. The apartment he was in adjoined that occupied by the outlaws, though there was no means of passing from one to the other.

"This is worse an' worse!" he groaned, after making a hasty survey of the cave and finding that there was no way out save by the door he had entered. "I'm trapped like a rat!"

But, as he stumbled forward, scanning the floor and the walls, his eyes caught the gleam of some brilliant object at his feet. He kicked it, and as it rolled forward, the light from the torch was reflected from it in points of fire, and he saw that it was a diamond!

CHAPTER XVII.

CAGED IN.

WITH a low cry he sunk upon the sandy floor, picked up the shining article, and examined it critically. There could be no doubt as to its character. It was as pure a diamond as ever came out of the mines of Brazil.

"Eureka!" he exclaimed, lifting his voice to an unguarded pitch. "I've found it. If this ain't the treasure-chamber, then I'll eat hay fer a livin'!"

With that he got down on his hands and knees and carefully examined the floor. No more diamonds were to be found there; and he flashed the light upon the walls. There were no shelves or niches crammed with treasure, such as he half expected to see.

"Sing'lar! There's bound to be more where that come from. And I'm goin' to find where it come from, now, before I do anything else."

He had apparently forgotten his position and circumstances—forgotten that only a moment before he had denominated himself a caged rat, and had felt that the death of a caged rat lay before him.

Clutching the diamond in one hand and lifting the torch high above his head with the other he went slowly around the cave. He had almost completed the circle when he stopped and stared into the semi-gloom beyond the ring of light. A bit of worm-eaten board projecting from the sand riveted his attention.

He hastened to it, and attempted to draw it forth, but the sand was packed about it and it resisted his efforts. It lay near the wall; and running his eyes over the bed of the cavern, he made a discovery. There was a well-defined elevation of the floor, as if, through the lapse of years, the sand had been drifted above some shelves or boxes. The elevation resembled in shape and size that of a grave worn down by time and the elements.

Sticking the torch in the wall near by, Toltec drew his knife and attacked the sandy grave with frantic energy. It required but the work of a few seconds to unearth the bit of board. Drawing it out he thrust down the knife, and was electrified when the point touched something which gave out a metallic ring.

Fired by dreams of the wealth beneath him, he again attacked the sand, digging it loose with the knife and shoveling it out with his hands. In a little while he had removed enough to enable him to clutch the box, of which the board had been a fragment; and with a mighty wrench he drew it from its bed.

With bated breath and heart throbbing wildly he tipped the contents out upon the floor, and tore away with trembling fingers the coverings of rotten deerskin. There was at least a quart of bright, gold nuggets.

Toltec did not stop to count them nor to estimate their value, but again turned to the sand in which they had been found.

Within an hour he had unearthed six of these boxes, each containing about a quart of nuggets and gold-dust, packed in rotten, deer-skin bags. And still he toiled on, not satisfied; and forgetful of the fact that he was to all appearances a prisoner condemned to death in that place.

Yet, when all is considered, his conduct was not so very much stranger than that of thousands of men whom the world calls sane and

prosperous, and who yet fight and toil and struggle for wealth far beyond their needs, and which can do them no good. Ay! scramble madly for it even when on the brink of the grave, and knowing that to the land whither they must soon go they cannot take it. It is one of the incongruous things of this odd world of ours.

The furious toil of the treasure-seeker brought no more boxes to light. Thoroughly the sand was searched, but without result.

He sat down to rest, and, if possible, to think over the matter. Where were the precious stones mentioned in the old writing? That they had once been in the cavern was proven, it seemed, by the one discovered. He was interrupted in his reflections by the torch, which, having burnt out, fell to the floor, plunging him in total darkness.

He lighted the second, and took another survey of the cave. The festooning cobwebs, hanging as they did in dusty folds, showed that no breezes from the outer world ever disturbed this death-like chamber—a fact also proven by the closeness and oppressiveness of the atmosphere. How then had the sand been drifted over the boxes he had unearthed?

He went back and looked again at the place from which he had removed them, and the conviction was forced upon him that they had been buried there by the priests. Why the bit of board had been left to project he could not tell, unless it may have been as a future guide to the place.

If the old Toltecs had taken so much pains to hide the store of nuggets, he reasoned that they would take as much or even greater pains to conceal the gems. So he again traversed the cave, scrutinizing the floors and walls minutely.

Suddenly a sharp cry leaped to his lips. A portion of the wall, near an angle, seemed to be sloughing off, a large crack being visible. He sprang to this. The wall there was a false one, cunningly fashioned of coarse mortar! The dry-rot had caused it to separate from the true rock, leaving the tell-tale gap.

Thrusting the end of his torch into the fissure, and careless of the fact that the flame scorched his face, Toltec gave a heavy surge, and the mortar-made section of the wall dropped at his feet. Behind it was a pocket, filled with bags, as had been the boxes.

With feverish haste he dragged these from their ancient resting-place. He counted them. There were just ten. Running a hand into one he drew forth a store of beautiful emeralds! The remaining nine, with one exception, also contained emeralds. The odd one was filled with diamonds much like that found in the sand.

Here was wealth sufficient to satisfy even the wildest dreams of avarice. Sitting by his treasures, Toltec ran his hands through the shining piles, and gloated with miserly mien over the riches that were now his.

Everything else was for the time forgotten, and he was only recalled to his position by the burning out of the torch. Gathering up a handful of the gems he thrust them into his pockets and then went in search of more material with which to make torches. He found this readily enough, but when he sought for a match he discovered, to his horror, that the case with its contents was missing.

Thinking he had dropped it near the gems he hastened back in that direction. But the intense gloom of the cave bewildered him and caused him to lose his way; and soon he was wandering in a circle, not knowing in what direction to turn.

He got down on his hands and knees and felt over the floor, striving in that manner to make his way back. By following along the wall he came finally to the point where he had unearthed the gold. There were the bags, just as he had left them, and the piles of nuggets. But their touch was hateful to him. All of the golden store would he have given at that moment for a single match.

Nowhere could he light upon the missing case, search as he might. Then he tried to guide himself to the place where he had left the gems. In this, however, he failed; and though he searched for hours and hours, and until his head seemed bursting, the case evaded his aching and eager fingers.

Hunger began to tell on him, likewise, combined with the pangs of thirst. Oh! for a draught of life-giving water. How quickly he would have exchanged the gems in his pockets for just a cupful. But there was no water in the cavern.

And thus, when unnumbered hours had fled, in darkness and loneliness and silence—for the voices from the other cave had not reached him

since he heard them first—he lay down in the sand, believing that for him death was his hand.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

ALL night long Jumbo Griggs lay upon the hill-top, feeding the fire from time to time that might not go out. Sleep did not come to him through all those tedious hours, because of the pain in his injured ankle.

Near morning he drained from his flask the last of the water and ate what was left of the food. Then he piled the fire higher with dry boughs, that the light might guide the troopers to him should they have reached the vicinity.

When day came he added damp earth to the boughs to create a heavy column of smoke. This, like the fire, might draw enemies as well as friends. But the chances must be taken.

Scarcely had the spiral of smoke risen above the tops of the trees, however, when he became aware that it had been seen. There was a clatter of hoofs on the stony turf far below; then the hail:

"Ho! the hill-top!"

At this Jumbo scrambled to his feet and with the assistance of his crutches placed himself in a position to observe the author of the hail.

It was a man with the shoulder-straps of a captain, and mounted on a magnificent beast. At the base of the hill there were more men.

"Hurrah!" and Jumbo flung his hat in air and fairly hugged himself with delight. "It's the soldiers from the post. Now, we'll do something. At least, as the Sister-in-Law urged so strenuously upon Mrs. Dombey, we'll make an effort!"

Then he stumped down the hill toward the officer, hoping against hope that Paou had been brought with the troops, a thing he had no reason to expect.

But Paou was not there, as he discovered all too soon.

"Paou? Oh, the Chinese!" and the captain pursed his lips. "Why, the disagreeable truth is, he got away last night, and could not be recaptured."

"And is in this neighborhood, then?" Jumbo exclaimed. "It'll go hard with Dillon and Somers if they fall into his power."

All of which was so evidently true that the troopers were got under way at once, and galloped at their best gait toward the river, the grumpy sergeant, in spite of his bad ankle, acting as pilot.

When the river was reached, which was within an hour after sunrise, Jumbo led the troopers straight into the water, swimming the beasts across. He believed it not only possible, but probable, that the prisoners had been conveyed to the cave where he once came so near death, as the outlaws seemed averse to taking any one to their secret lair.

When the vicinity of this cave had been gained, the men were dismounted, the horses left in charge of a few, and the others led direct to the concealed entrance. And this movement was not effected a moment too soon. Paou, with his heart filled with bitter hate, had arrived at the cavern but a few moments before.

Even as the troopers were crawling stealthily forward, he was taunting his captives with their helpless condition, and preparing to take summary and swift vengeance upon them. He had had them bound to the post, and to judge by appearances, the knife-throwing ordeal was soon to follow.

At sight of this the sergeant's eyes blazed.

"Charge them!" he commanded.

The soldiers obeyed with a whoop and yell. There was a rattling fire, as the outlaws endeavored to repel the charge. But it lasted for only a moment. When the smoke cleared away many dead were seen upon the floor. The others were flying to freedom through a means of exit before unknown to Jumbo.

Among the slain was Paou. No mere flesh wound this time from which to return by quick recovery to villainous deeds. It was a terrible ending of a career of crime. Cut down in the prime of manhood, and in the enactment of cruelty! Yet it was an end to have been anticipated, and a fitting close to the life he had led.

The fight was scarcely over when Margaret Grant unexpectedly appeared upon the scene. She was mounted on the horse that had escaped from Jumbo, it having returned to the house; and her skirts were dripping wet from contact with the river. Yet, even in this plight, Dillon thought her the most handsome woman he had ever seen.

"I saw the soldiers as they crossed the river,"

"and by the aid of my glass revealed Mr. Griggs. I have a letter for him from your father. I caught the horse and came as quickly as possible.

Her features were pale and anxious, showing that she feared the worst from the contents of the letter. Her father had said it was to be delivered, if he had not returned within twelve hours. Since then twenty-four hours had passed.

The sergeant hastily tore open the envelope and glanced down the sheet of writing.

"There's more work for us to do!" he said, passing the letter to Margaret. "Get the men ready to move at once. I hope those Chinese were so scared by the little tussle we've just had that they'll take to the hills, and not go near this other place with news of our presence."

Somers and Dillon, and the captain of the force, were made acquainted with the nature of the writing, and then the purport of it was communicated to the men. A knowledge of the probable peril in which Toltec was placed stirred all to the greatest activity.

When the advance was ordered on the hidden tunnel spoken of in the letter Margaret accompanied the force, her anxiety being too intense to allow her to return home.

By means of a cautious approach the guard at the tunnel's mouth was swiftly and silently overpowered, and then was forced at the muzzle of a revolver to open the hidden doors leading to the home of the League.

Thus the troopers were able to appear before Flint and his associates in a manner that was terrible and startling in its suddenness. There was no time for flight, neither was there opportunity for effective resistance. A half-dozen men, taking advantage of the bold example of Toltec Tom, escaped by the river. The others were either captured or slain.

Basil Flint was among those taken alive; and for his many crimes he suffered an imprisonment that will be for life, for him.

Toltec Tom, imprisoned as it seemed to him for cruel days although only one night had fled, heard the sound of firing and of combat, and rightly guessed the cause. He had laid himself down to die, but hope now revived, strength of body and mind came back, and he determined to live.

His stentorian calls were heard and the direction located. A cartridge of giant powder for mine blasting was found among the stores of the outlaws. Under the supervision of Jumbo it was placed in position to shatter the intervening walls.

"All ready!" the post sergeant called out, when he was prepared to light the fuse. "Get back somewhere, Toltec. The rocks will fly when this goes off. The mountain from its firm base will start. All ready?"

Toltec replied in the affirmative, a cheerful accent in his tones.

A minute later the very island shook with the tremendousness of the explosion. The separating wall was torn down. Not only that but a portion of the side wall facing the river was removed. Into the apartment occupied by Toltec poured the resistless flood. By the flaring lights of the torches the old man was seen on its crest, being swept as it seemed to death! But, Jumbo, the ever-reliable Jumbo, forgetful of bruises and sprained ankle, stretched forth a helping hand, and dragged the treasure-seeker to safety.

There is but little more to tell, though that little will reveal a secret which the reader has probably not guessed.

Thomas Grant, alias Toltec Tom, had been, in all his dealings with friends and foes, largely playing a part. He was not what he seemed. True he was a treasure-seeker, and believed firmly in the story told in the old Toltec writings. But he was more. He was a cool, long-headed agent of the Secret Service, sent to that region for the express purpose of hunting down the Loco League.

It was known by the general in command that the League had paid spies among the people at Fort Mesquite. So, while the commandant sent Dillon and Jumbo—a fact known almost instantly to Basil Flint, as we have seen—the general sent Toltec Tom in the role of the Mad Prospector. And this, with the knowledge of the traitorous character of Smith Silcott, will explain to the reader why Toltec had looked upon his self-invited guests with such distrust. Toltec was never himself suspected by any one, and what he accomplished it has been the aim of this story, among other things, to tell. But for his cunning and boldness the home of the island League might never have been found.

The immense treasure which so nearly cost him his life and his reason was engulfed by the

flood. Nothing was saved of it but the handful of gems he had thrust into his pockets. But these were worth a king's ransom.

A portion of the proceeds of their sale was invested in an Arizona cattle-ranch; and in caring for his herds, and in making welcome and happy the many guests who flock about him each winter, the old treasure-seeker has his heart and hands full.

Dillon, with pretty Margaret as his wife, has settled down in an Arizonian home of his own. It is only a stone's throw from that of Toltec Tom. They are frequently visited by the jolly sergeant, Jumbo Griggs. Even Somers, the showman, stops his wanderings occasionally and takes a run down there.

Jumbo is still a soldier, and tells himself he will always be one. He is a typical soldier, too; honest, brave, loyal! But whatever glory awaits him in future fields of adventure he will never forget the dangers and excitements of his fight with the Loco League.

THE END.

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- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 226 Snoozier, the Boy Sharp; or, The Arab Detective.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
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- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
- 273 Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; or, The Rival Heirs.
- 277 Denver Doll, the Detective Queen.
- 281 Denver Doll's Victory.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decey; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 291 Turk, the Boy Ferret.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 308 Liza Jane, the Girl Miner; or, the Iron-Nerved Sport.
- 325 Kelley, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia.
- 330 Little Quick-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggersville.
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- 339 Kangaroo Kit's Racket.
- 343 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Blood.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
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- 389 Bleyce Ben; or, The Lion of Lightning Lode.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
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- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
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- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher.
- 446 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler.

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- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 128 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansaw; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tonknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowle.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowle Blade of Gochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pard; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foo.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
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- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
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- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 558 Dodger Dick's Desperate Chase.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Videoq.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
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- 645 Kit, the Pavement Sharp.
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- 604 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire.
- 619 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.
- 629 Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport.
- 641 Dismal Dave's Dandy Pard.
- 651 Bound Boy Frank, the Young Amateur Detective.
- 663 Violet Vane's Victory.
- 682 Wild Vulcan, the Lone-Range Rider.
- 698 Violet and Daisy, the Posy Pards.
- 705 Violet Vane's Vow; or, The Crafty Detective's Craft.
- 714 Old Misery, the Man from Missouri.
- 724 Violet Vane's Vengeance.

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- 7 The Flying Yankee; or, The Ocean Outcast.
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- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenants.
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- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Boy Smuggler.
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- 216 Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins; or, Buffalo Bill's Pluck.
- 222 Grit, the Bravo Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
- 229 Crimson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 237 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
- 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 264 The Floating Feather; or, Merle Monte's Treasure.
- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, "The Gold Ship" Chase.
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
- 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Snot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Trail.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
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- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 393 Seawolf, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isador, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
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- 429 Duncan Dare, the Boy Refugee.
- 438 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
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- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferret Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
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- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
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- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
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